

Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission Report

For the Community Development Committee meeting of September 16, 2019

Subject: Blakeley Bluffs Park Reserve Acquisition Master Plan Amendment and Boundary Adjustment, Scott County, Review File No. 50019-3

Proposed Action

That the Metropolitan Council:

1. Approve Scott County's Blakeley Bluffs Park Reserve Acquisition Master Plan Amendment.
2. Approve the boundary adjustment adding 7-acres of high-quality, natural resource land along the Minnesota River in Blakeley Township.
3. Inform Scott County that it must submit the Blakeley Bluffs Park Reserve Development Master Plan for Metropolitan Council approval prior to requesting funding for development.

Summary of Committee Discussion/Questions

Tracey Kinney, Planner, presented the staff report to the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission at its meeting on September 5, 2019. Patty Freeman from Scott County was also in attendance.

The proposed actions were approved unanimously by the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space.

Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission

Meeting date: September 5, 2019

For the Community Development Committee meeting of September 16, 2019

For the Metropolitan Council meeting of September 25, 2019

Subject: Blakeley Bluffs Park Reserve Acquisition Master Plan Amendment and Boundary Adjustment, Scott County, Review File No. 50019-3

MPOSC District, Member: District B, Robert Moeller

Council District, Member: 4 – Deb Barber

Policy/Legal Reference: Minnesota Statutes § 473.313; *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*, Chapter 5, Planning Strategy 1, and Chapter 4, Siting and Acquisition

Staff Prepared/Presented: Tracey Kinney, Planner, 651-602-1029

Division/Department: Community Development / Regional Planning

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Background

Blakeley Bluffs Park Reserve is located in the southwest part of the Regional Parks System along the Minnesota River in Blakeley Township, Scott County (Figures 1 and 2). The planned park reserve is east of the Minnesota River and the Minnesota Valley State Recreation Area and north of the Department of Natural Resources Ney Wildlife Management Area, as well as, serves as a hub for two regional trail search corridors, one of which runs the length of the park reserve.

The planned park reserve is in an acquisition and stewardship phase and is currently not open to the public. The park reserve has a 2012 original acquisition master plan and a 2015 acquisition master plan amendment. Scott County intends to prepare a development master plan for Blakeley Bluffs in six-to-eight years.

Scott County is requesting to add 7 acres and remove 145 acres from the master plan boundary reducing the total acreage of the park reserve from 2,545-acres to 2,407-acres (Figures 3 and 5). The additional 7 acres is a part of a 38-acre property that is already within the current boundary, but was unintentionally omitted. One of the properties (121.03 acres) to be removed was purchased by the Department of Natural Resources to be added to the Ney Wildlife Management Area. Metropolitan Council approval of this request and the concurrent future funding request (Business Item 2019-229) will increase the acquired land for the park reserve from 588-acres to 625-acres (Figure 4).

Rationale

The Blakeley Bluffs Park Reserve Acquisition Master Plan Amendment and Boundary Adjustment is consistent with the requirements of the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan* including Chapter 5, Planning Strategy 1, and Chapter 4 Siting and Acquisition.

Thrive Lens Analysis

The Blakeley Bluffs Park Reserve Acquisition Master Plan Amendment and Boundary Adjustment advances the Thrive outcome of Stewardship through responsibly managing the region's finite resources including conserving quality natural resources.

Funding

The total cost of acquiring the 38-acre parcel is estimated at \$740,351 including purchase price, closing costs, demolition, securing the property, and converting an existing residence on the parcel to low maintenance grass cover.

Approval of this boundary amendment in this acquisition master plan makes the acquisition costs eligible for regional parks funding, but does not commit the Council to any funding. Scott County has requested a Park Acquisition Opportunity Fund grant for the 38-acre, O'Reilly property, which is being considered under a separate, subsequent action (Business Item 2019-229).

Known Support / Opposition

The Scott County Board adopted a resolution authorizing the grant submittal and purchase agreement for the O'Reilly property and alignment of park reserve boundary for Blakeley Bluffs Park Reserve at its July 16, 2019 meeting and adopted a second resolution of support for the purchase of property in the planned Blakeley Bluffs Park Reserve by MN DNR at its May 21, 2013 meeting.

Blakeley Township expressed concerns about increasing the acreage of the park reserve boundary above 2,440 acres in previous planning efforts. This request would reduce the total acreage of the park reserve from 2,545-acres to 2,407-acres, reflecting Blakeley Township's request. Scott County updated Blakeley Township of the proposed boundary adjustment at its annual Town Board meeting on March 12, 2019.

Analysis

Scott County is requesting to add 7 acres to the Blakeley Bluffs Park Reserve Acquisition Master Plan prior to purchase and without a development plan; therefore, it is subject to the criteria described below.

The 2018 update of the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan* provides new guidance for acquisition master plans in Chapter 5, Planning Policy Strategy 1, Master Plans “that focuses solely on the land required to establish the unit or adjust an existing Council-approved master plan boundary. The Council must approve the acquisition master plan prior to acquisition. Acquisition master plans shall include:

- A demonstration of the proposed regional park system unit’s consistency with Chapter 4: Siting and Acquisition – Strategy 1, including size/service area requirements
- Boundaries and acquisition costs: A list of parcels to be acquired and the estimated total cost and schedule for their acquisition, and information on natural resources, site suitability, special assessments, potential contamination based on data from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and other conditions that affect acquisition of the site or location of the boundaries

Before any development occurs or the Council provides any other financial assistance to the new or existing regional park system unit, agencies must gain a Council-approved development master plan that includes all of the additional required elements outlined above.”

Consistency with Chapter 4: Siting and Acquisition – Strategy 1, including size/service area requirements

Siting and Acquisition Strategy 1 states that “lands with natural resource features, access to water, and/or restoration potential will be a priority for the Regional Parks System. Future Council designation of lands for the Regional Parks System should emphasize important natural resource features, access to water bodies, and natural resource features that enhance outdoor recreation.”

The follow provides an evaluation of the major considerations in deciding which lands should be brought into the Regional Parks System, including:

- Acquiring lands with natural qualities most desirable for outdoor recreational activities
- Protecting an important natural resource feature, such as linking other nature resource areas or water bodies together, which in turn provide a larger natural habitat opportunity; help protect or improve water quality; or provide habitat for protected or endangered species
- Ensuring regional park facilities are evenly distributed around the metropolitan area or distributed in proportion to existing and forecasted urban development
- Size/service area requirements

Acquiring lands with natural qualities most desirable for outdoor recreational activities

The 7 acres to be added to the master plan boundary will protect the flood plain and bluffs of the Minnesota River Valley in perpetuity. The property will provide a critical link for a future hiking trail that will run the length of the park reserve and through this property. It will provide yet to be known benefits as a flexible space on the floodplain across from potential amenities including space for signage or opportunities for birding activities.

The 7 acres proposed to be added to the park reserve is part of the purchase consideration of a 38-acre property already within the park reserve boundary. The remaining portions of the 38-acre property offers opportunity for western views of the bluffs and great hiking trails. Due to its unique topography, the property will give direct access from the floodplain to a terrace area that could be used for picnicking or other park amenities.

Protecting an important natural resource feature

The 7-acres to be added to the master plan boundary are in the floodplain of the Minnesota River and contain forested wetlands and shallow waters, as well as, areas of hydric soils that can support critical wetland ecosystems according to the 2018 Minnesota Land Cover Classification System (MLCCS).

The land cover of the remaining portions of the 38-acre property includes mesic hardwood forests dominated by oak species. These forests tend to be more established forest ecosystems within the region, and they provide a variety of habitats for local wildlife as dense and diverse stands (Figure 6).

Distribution of regional parks

Blakeley Bluffs Regional Park Reserve is a unique and extensive natural resource and recreational asset in the southwest metro. Southwest Scott County was identified by the Metropolitan Council as an area underserved by the Regional Parks System during the Metropolitan Council's update in 2005 to the 2030 Regional Parks Policy Plan; therefore, it was added to the Regional Parks System in 2005 to address this gap.

Size/service area requirements

Chapter Four Siting and Acquisition of the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan* provides size and service area criteria for park reserves in the Regional Parks System. Regional Parks System Park Reserves must draw visitors from across the region and consist of at least 1,000 acres.

Regional Visitors Demand

The approach used for estimating regional visitor demand is based on current use at the Regional Park System Park Reserves according to the 2018 Metropolitan Council Use Estimate (Table 1). Of those twelve, Crow Hassan and Lake Rebecca Park Reserves are the most comparable to Blakely Bluffs Park Reserve, for their rural location and offering of outstanding natural resources along the Crow Wing River. Using this approach and if fully developed as envisioned, Blakely Bluffs Park Reserve should experience between 100,000 to 240,000 visits each year, not including visits associated with the two regional trail search corridors.

Table 1. Existing Park Reserves and Annual Use

| Existing Special Recreation Feature | Annual Use (2018) |
|---|-------------------|
| Baker Park Reserve | 527,308 |
| Big Marine Park Reserve | 227,036 |
| Bush and Normandale Lakes Regional Park | 874,043 |
| Carver Park Reserve | 394,266 |
| Crow-Hassan Park Reserve | 104,004 |
| Elm Creek Park Reserve | 1,365,242 |
| Lake Elmo Park Reserve | 620,965 |
| Lake Rebecca Park Reserve | 240,597 |
| Miesville Ravine Park Reserve | 31,306 |
| Murphy-Hanrehan Park Reserve (Scott County) | 112,580 |
| Rice Creek Chain of Lakes Park Reserve | 739,542 |
| Spring Lake Park Reserve | 120,170 |

Size

The proposed boundary change would reduce the boundary from 2,545 to 2,407 acres, well above the 1,000-acre minimum for park reserves. Additionally, when the development master plan is created for the park reserve, Scott County anticipates that at least 80% of the land will be managed for natural resources conservation. Council approval of this request and the future funding request (Business Item

2019-229) will increase the acquired land for the park reserve and the land being currently managed for conservation from 588-acres to 625-acres (Figure 4).

Boundaries and acquisition costs

Scott County is requesting an amendment to the 2015 Blakeley Bluffs Park Reserve Acquisition Master Plan to remove 137.679-acres from the southwest corner of the reserve boundary. This reduction includes the addition of 7 acres from a larger 38-acre property within the current boundary and the removal of 144.67-acres most of which was purchased by the Department of Natural Resources for inclusion in the Ney Wildlife Management Area to the south.

Boundary

The boundary for the proposed Blakeley Bluffs Park Reserve Acquisition Master Plan Amendment includes 2,407-acres that consists of 588-acres currently owned by Scott County, 7 acres to be added that is part of a 38-acre parcel currently held by a private party, but subject to a future purchase agreement with Scott County, and 145 acres to be removed from the boundary (Figure 3).

Land to be Added

The property under purchase consideration will add 7 acres to the park boundary. The property is located in Blakeley Township generally north of the Department of Natural Resource Ney Wildlife Management Area, west and south of CR 51, east of the Union Pacific Railroad (Figure 4).

Land to be Removed

Three parcels totaling 145 acres are proposed to be removed from the boundary. These are parcels are also located in Blakeley Township generally north of the Ney Wildlife Management Area, west and south of the park reserve, and east of CR 51 and the Union Pacific Railroad. The Department of Natural Resources recently purchased the southern-most 121-acre parcel (PIN 139-20300053) to add to the Ney Wildlife Management Area. The remaining 10- and 14-acre properties (PINs 139-293000051 and 139-20090010) are small properties with structures on them near the Wildlife Management Area (Figure 4).

Natural Resources

The additional 7 acres to be added to the park reserve boundary lies within the floodplain of the Minnesota River Valley. Based on the MLCCS database, the floodplain habitats on the property include flooded deciduous woodland, Willow Swamp, and Floodplain Forest - Silver Maple Subtype (Figure 6).

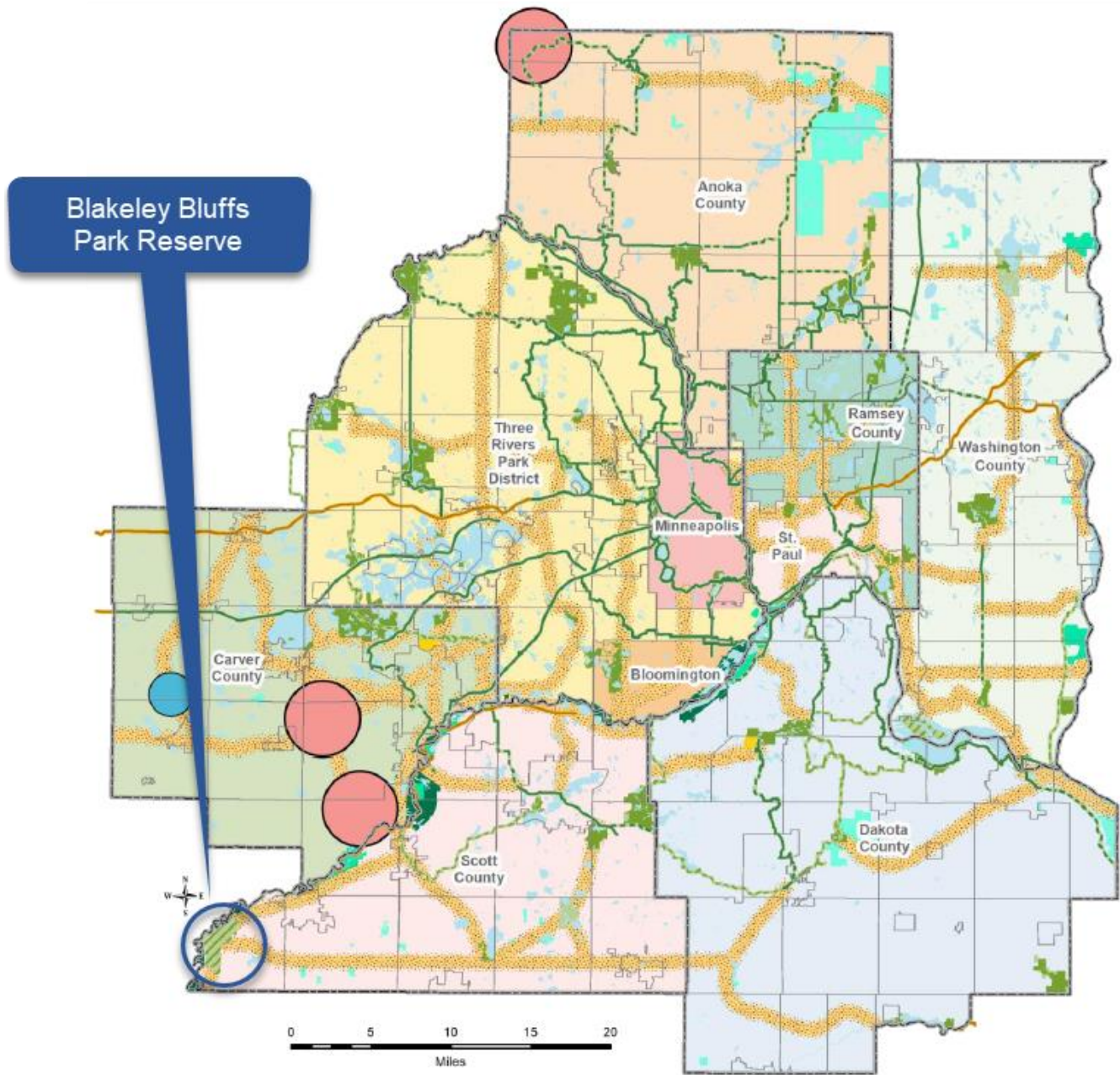
Easements

The 38-acre property including the 7-acres to be added to the acquisition master plan boundary is subject to a conservation easement held by the Minnesota Land Trust. The easement ensures the protection of the natural, scenic, and open space qualities of significant importance. The easement allows for minor improvements and trail development.

Acquisitions

The tentative acquisition cost for the 38-acre property (PIN 139-29190021) is \$740,351 including \$649,900 for acquisition and \$90,451 for appraisal, closing, and stewardship.

Figure 1. Blakeley Bluffs Park Reserve within the Regional Parks System



Regional Park Search Areas and Regional Trail Search Corridors

- Regional Parks (Open to the Public)
- Regional Parks (Not Open to the Public)
- Planned Parks (Not Open to the Public)
- Regional Trails (Open to the Public)
- - - Regional Trails (Not Open to the Public)
- Planned Regional Trails (Not Open to the Public)
- Regional Trail Search Corridors
- Existing State Trails
- Park Boundary Adjustments
- Park Search Areas

Figure 2. Blakeley Bluffs Park Reserve within the Scott County Parks System

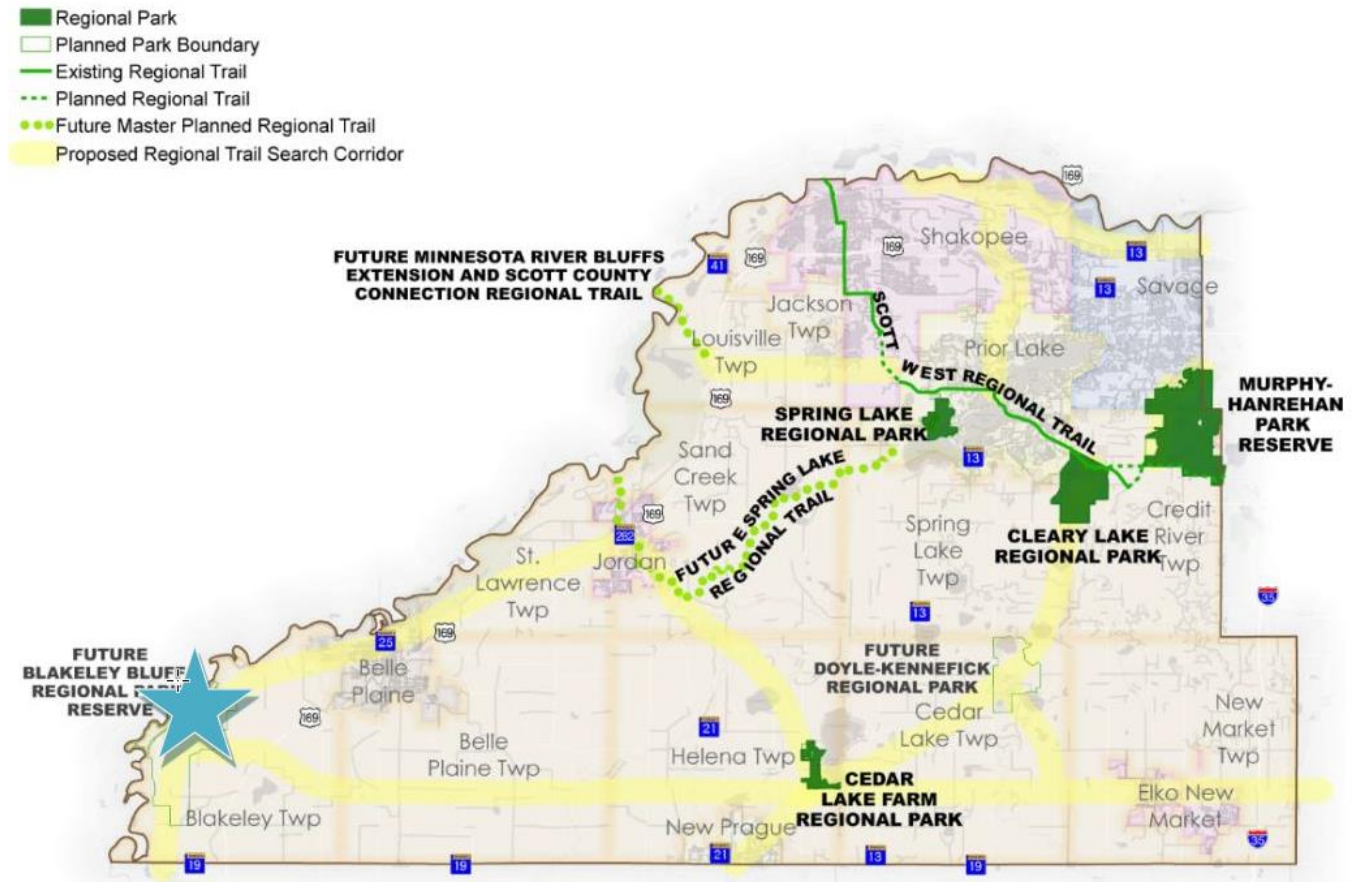


Figure 3. Land Added/Removed and Boundary Adjustment

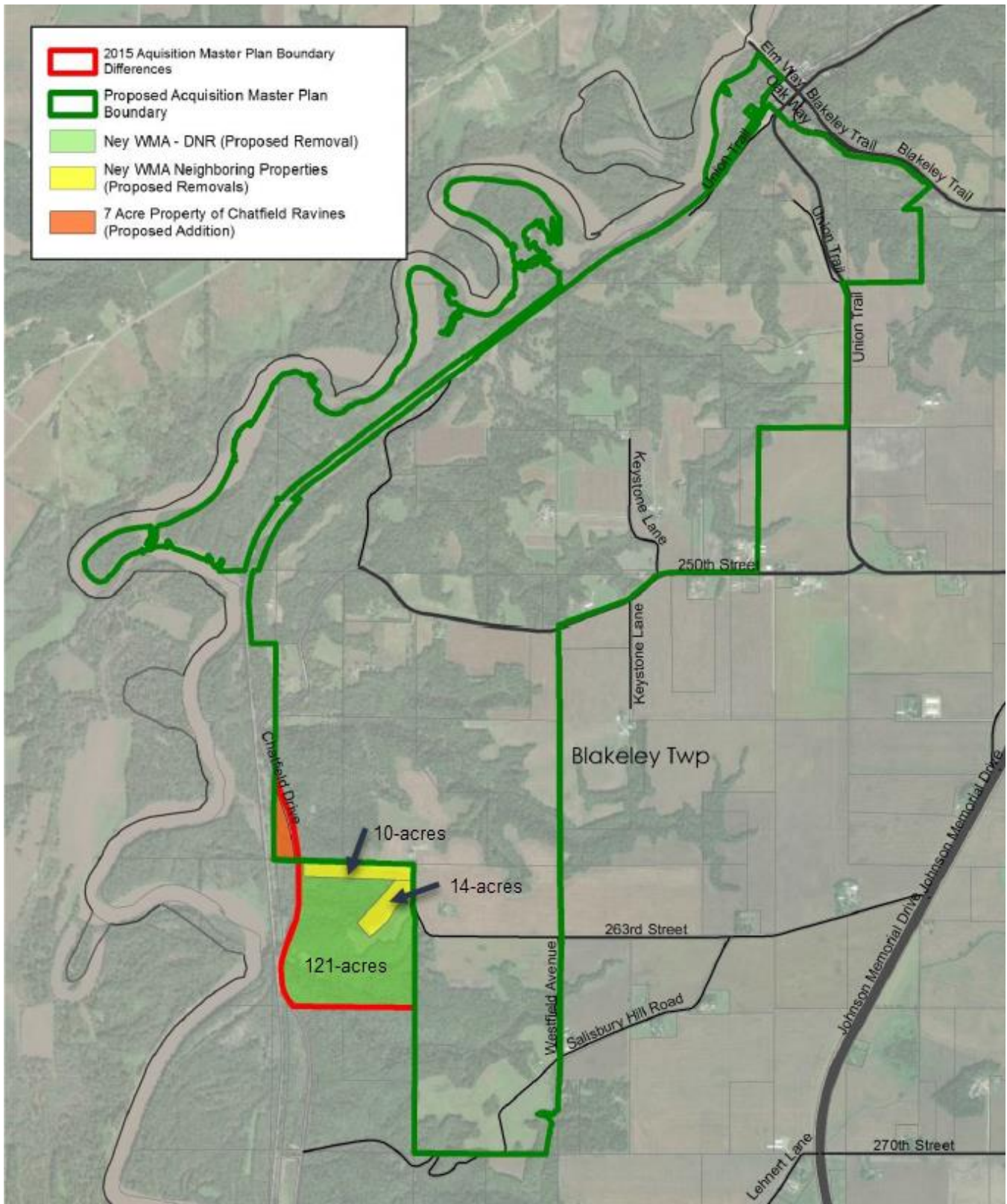


Figure 4. Acquired Parkland

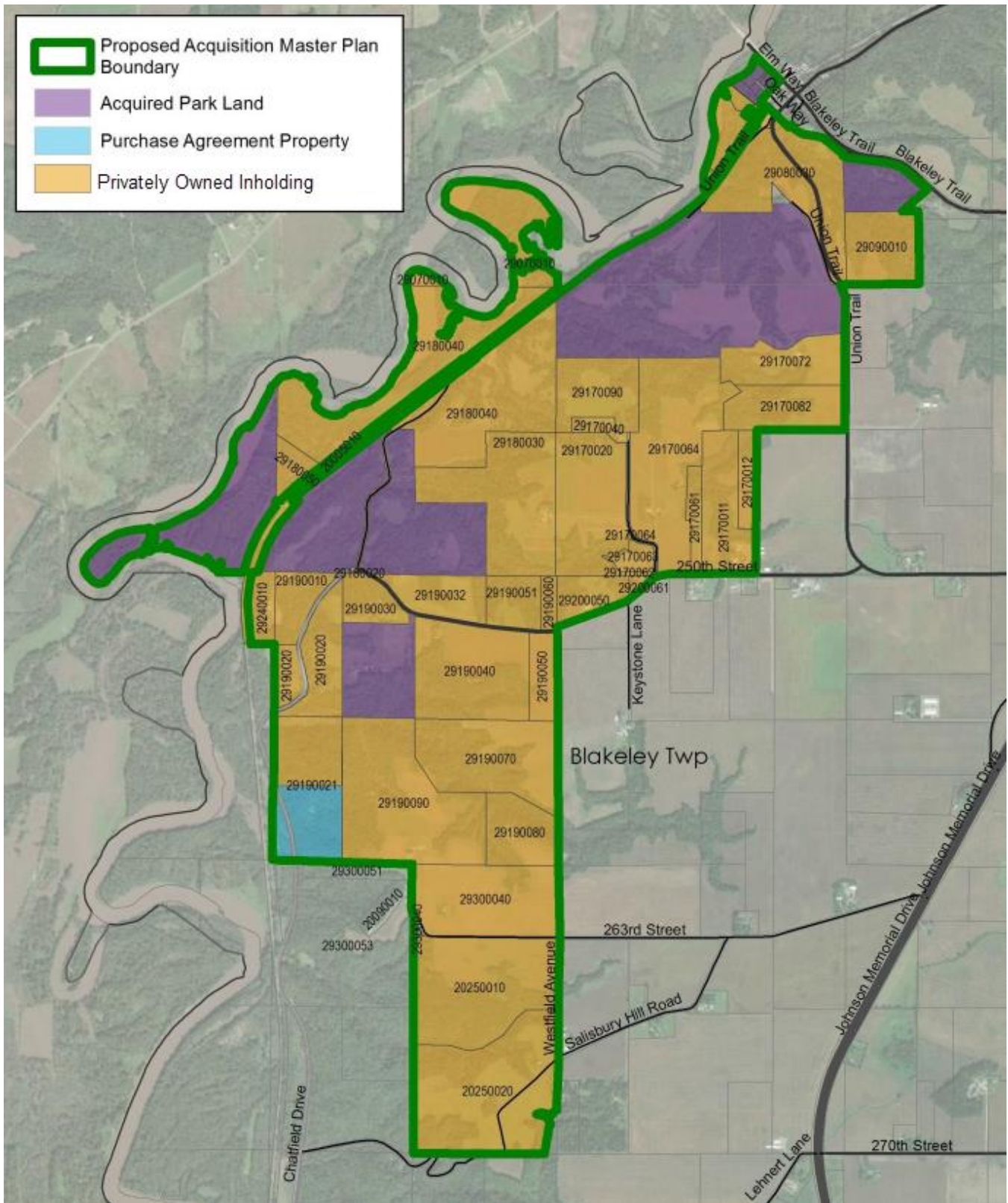


Figure 5. Land to be Added to the Park Boundary

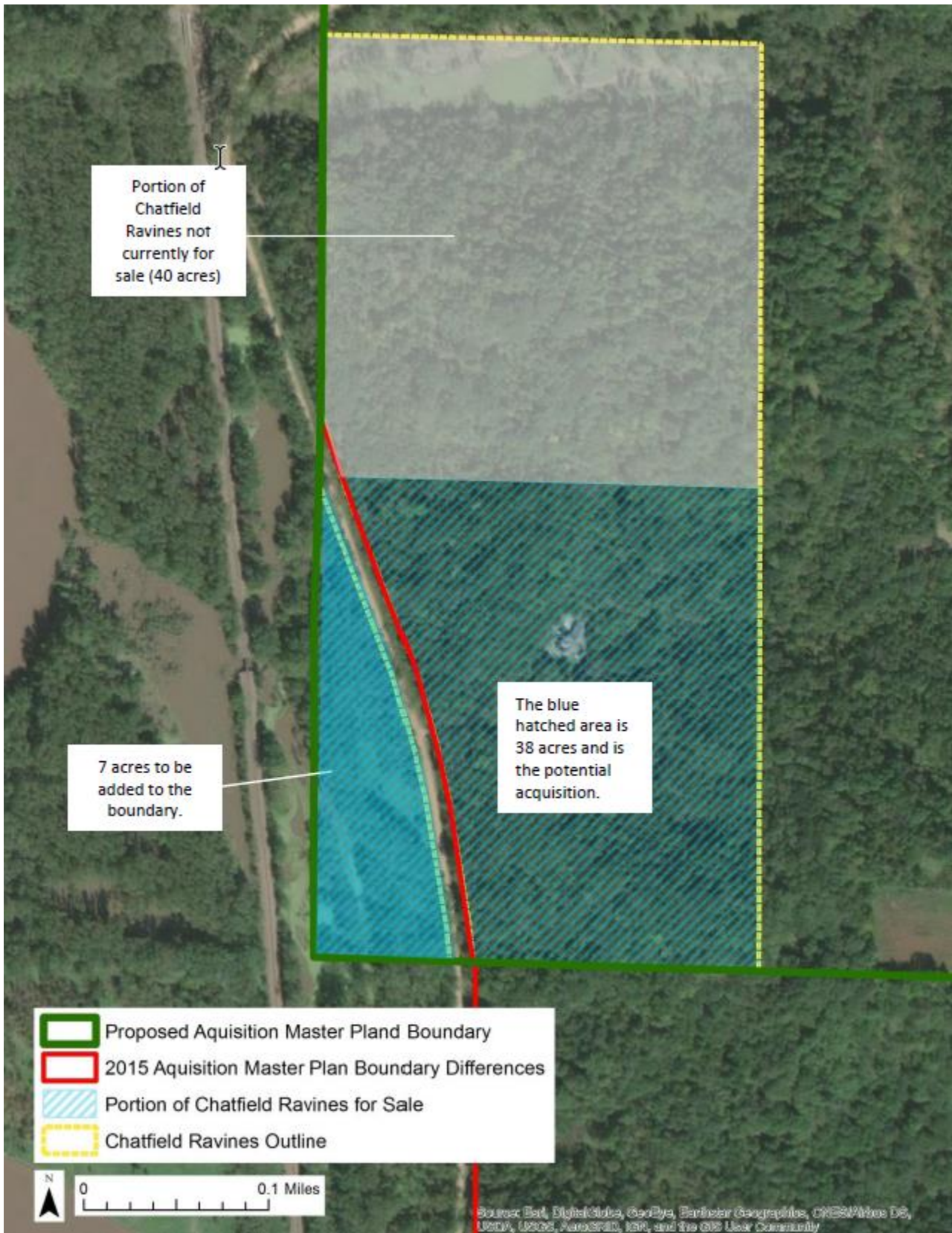
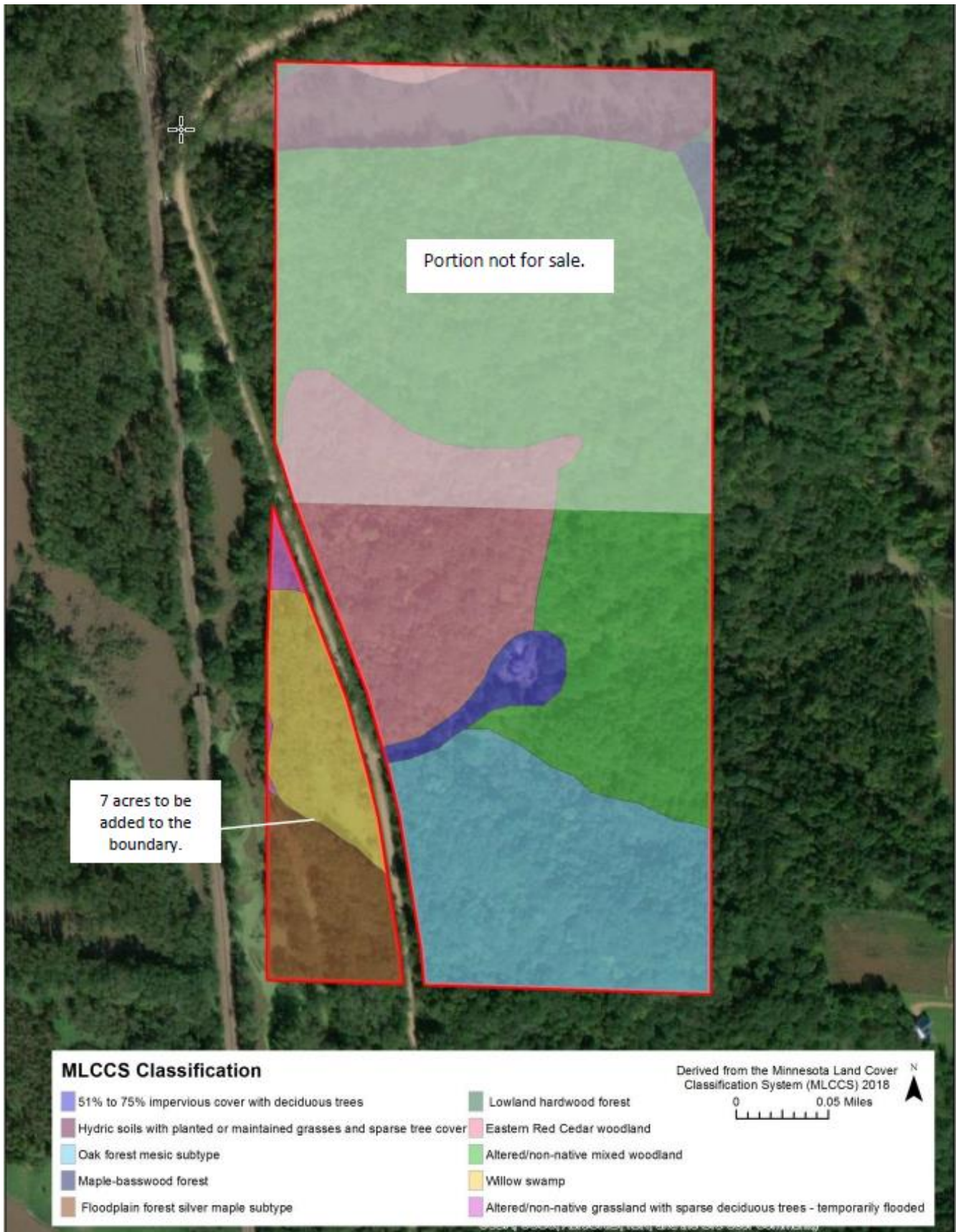


Figure 6. Natural Resources of the Added Land



Review by Other Council Divisions

Community Development – Environment and Surface Water Management (Jim Larsen 651-602-1159) – No additional comments.

Community Development – Forecasts (Todd Graham 651-602-1322) – No additional comments.

Community Development – Housing (Hilary Lovelace 651-602-1555) – No additional comments.

Environmental Services – Sewer (Roger Janzig 651-602-1119) – No additional comments.

Metro Transit (Steve Mahowald 612-349-7775) – No additional comments.

Transportation Planning (Russ Owen 651-602-1724) – No additional comments.

Local Planning Assistance – Land Use (Raya Esmaeili 651-602-1616) – No additional comments.