

Community Development Committee Report

For the Metropolitan Council meeting of May 26, 2021

Subject: Square Lake Special Recreation Feature Master Plan, Washington County, Review File No. 50225-1

Proposed Action

That the Metropolitan Council:

1. Approve Washington County’s Square Lake Special Recreation Feature Master Plan.

Summary of Committee Discussion/Questions

Colin Kelly, Planning Analyst, presented the staff report to the Community Development Committee at its May 17, 2021 meeting. Connor Schaefer, Washington County Parks Planner, was also present and responded to questions.

Council Member Lee asked how Washington County could make scuba diving more accessible and affordable to all users at Square Lake. Schaefer responded that the County is considering options and opportunities to offer demonstrations and connect interested visitors to local organizations who offer scuba certifications, for example. Schaefer added that the acquisition of the Golden Acres property immediately south of the existing park would allow for a dedicated scuba diving staging area.

The Community Development Committee voted unanimously to approve the proposed action.

Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission Report

For the Community Development Committee meeting of May 17, 2021

For the Metropolitan Council meeting of May 26, 2021

Subject: Square Lake Special Recreation Feature Master Plan, Washington County, Review File No. 50225-1

Proposed Action

That the Metropolitan Council:

1. Approve Washington County's Square Lake Special Recreation Feature Master Plan.

Summary of Committee Discussion/Questions

Colin Kelly, Planning Analyst, presented the staff report to the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission at its meeting on May 6, 2021. Connor Schaefer, Washington County Parks Planner and Sandy Breuer, Washington County Park Director, were in attendance and responded to questions.

Commissioner Peichel asked whether the 30-minute travel shed was limited to Washington County. Kelly responded that it was not; that it went into adjacent counties as well as western Wisconsin.

Chair Yarusso asked for more information on the adaptive management approach mentioned in relation to natural resources. Kelly referenced the Natural Resources section of the staff report Analysis, noting that the management approach is an incremental process of testing techniques, observing effectiveness, and adjusting techniques in response.

Commissioner Moeller asked for clarification on the criteria for a special recreation feature. Kelly responded that special recreation features typically require a unique programming or management effort and are usually smaller in size than regional parks. Square Lake has some of the clearest waters in the Twin Cities metropolitan area and draws visitors from across the region.

Chair Yarusso asked about Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' (MN DNR) efforts to stock the lake with trout. Schaefer responded that the master plan focuses on Square Lake's land base and access to the lake, recognizing management of the lake and any trout stocking is the responsibility of the MN DNR. Schaefer added that MN DNR suspended stocking trout until further notice.

Council Member Atlas-Ingebretson asked whether race was considered in the equity analysis. Kelly responded that it was and mentioned that the disparities referenced in the staff report compare Washington County park and trail visitors to the overall County population. When Washington County park and trail visitors are compared to the overall metropolitan area population, race and ethnicity are also considered disparities. Schaefer added that Council Research staff also conducted an analysis of Square Lake visitation using location-based cell phone data (a.k.a., Streetlight). A presentation of these findings is available in the master plan's appendices.

Commissioner Harris noted that Square Lake visitation is surprisingly diverse for the fairly rural location of the special recreation feature, having personally visited the park on numerous occasions.

Commissioner Dillenburg mentioned the lack of public transit access to Square Lake and suggested Washington County consider providing some form of transportation stipend or

coupon for disadvantaged communities, noting transportation is often a major barrier to people visiting regional parks.

Commissioner Taylor asked multiple questions. First, he asked for clarification on a proposed trail connection between Pine Point Regional Park and Square Lake. Kelly responded that , as a result of last year's system additions process, there is a regional trail search corridor connecting the two regional park system units. A master plan has not yet been developed. Next, Taylor asked about the potential for programming at Square Lake. Schaefer noted that stand-up paddleboard programs are currently very popular and said the County is interested in expanding programming options at the special recreation feature. In addition, Taylor asked about potential outreach efforts to underserved populations and referenced the east side of St. Paul. He suggested Square Lake could be an excellent entry point for new users to the regional park system. Schaefer noted the County is interested in expanding its marketing efforts and that this is an area they will be looking into.

The Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commissioners voted unanimously to approve the proposed action.

Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission

Meeting date: May 6, 2021

For the Community Development Committee meeting of May 17, 2021

For the Metropolitan Council meeting of May 26, 2021

Subject: Square Lake Special Recreation Feature Master Plan, Washington County, Review File No. 50225-1

MPOSC District, Member: District F, Cecily Harris

Council Districts, Members: District 12, Francisco Gonzalez

Policy/Legal Reference: Minn. Stat. § 473.313; *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan* Planning Policy – Strategy 1

Staff Prepared/Presented: Colin Kelly, AICP, Planning Analyst (651-602-1361)

Division/Department: Community Development/ Regional Planning

Proposed Action

That the Metropolitan Council:

1. Approve Washington County's Square Lake Special Recreation Feature Master Plan.

Background

Square Lake Special Recreation Feature is located in the northeast part of the Regional Parks System (Figure 1) in May Township, Washington County (Figure 2). It is approximately eight miles north of Stillwater. Washington County is the regional parks implementing agency for Square Lake Special Recreation Feature and submitted this master plan to the Metropolitan Council in April 2021 following a year-long planning process.

Special recreation features are included as a component of the regional recreation open space system (Minnesota Statutes, section 473.121, subd. 14) and are defined as Regional Parks System opportunities not generally found in parks, park reserves or trail corridors. They often require a unique managing or programming effort on the part of the regional park implementing agency. Square Lake's designation as a special recreation feature stems from the pristine water of the lake itself and high-quality swimming opportunities. The lake has some of the clearest water in the Twin Cities region.

At 25 acres, Square Lake Special Recreation Feature provides several recreation opportunities including scuba diving, swimming, fishing, lake access, picnicking, and hiking (Figure 3). The lake and its natural backdrop provide a pleasant and popular setting, which is enjoyed residents throughout the region.

The Square Lake Special Recreation Feature Master Plan (Plan) has been developed in collaboration with park users, project stakeholders, and the community to create a comprehensive, long-term vision for the park's future. The planning process sought to balance appropriate recreation opportunities and facilities with natural resource protection and management, with a special focus on maintaining the water quality of the lake; the site's defining feature. The Plan is intended to be used as both a short- and long-term guide for strategic park capital improvements, acquisitions, and natural resource management to provide a high-quality park experience for all visitors.

Figure 1: Special Recreation Features Open to the Public (2020), Square Lake location

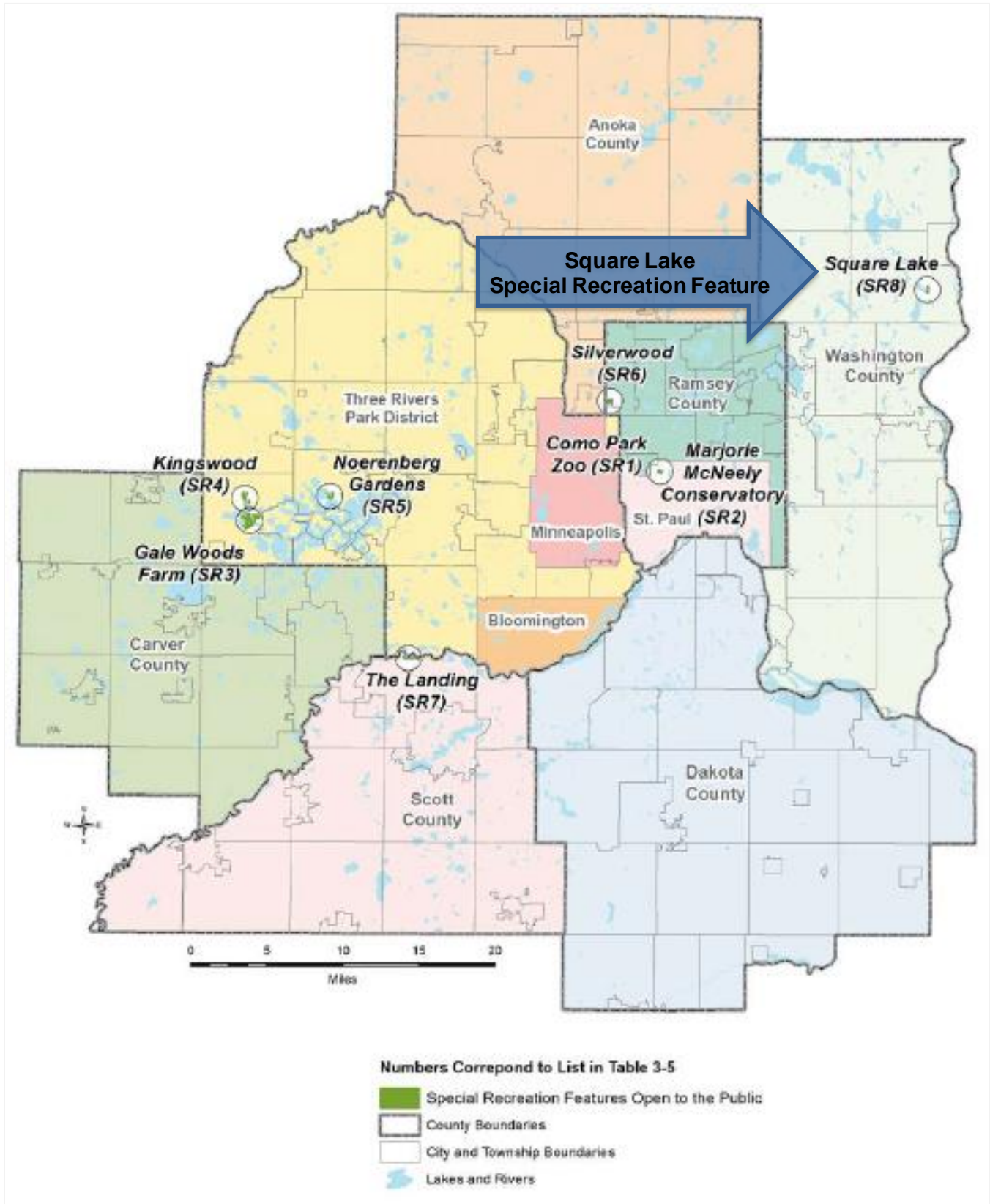


Figure 2: Regional Parks System, May Township, Washington County

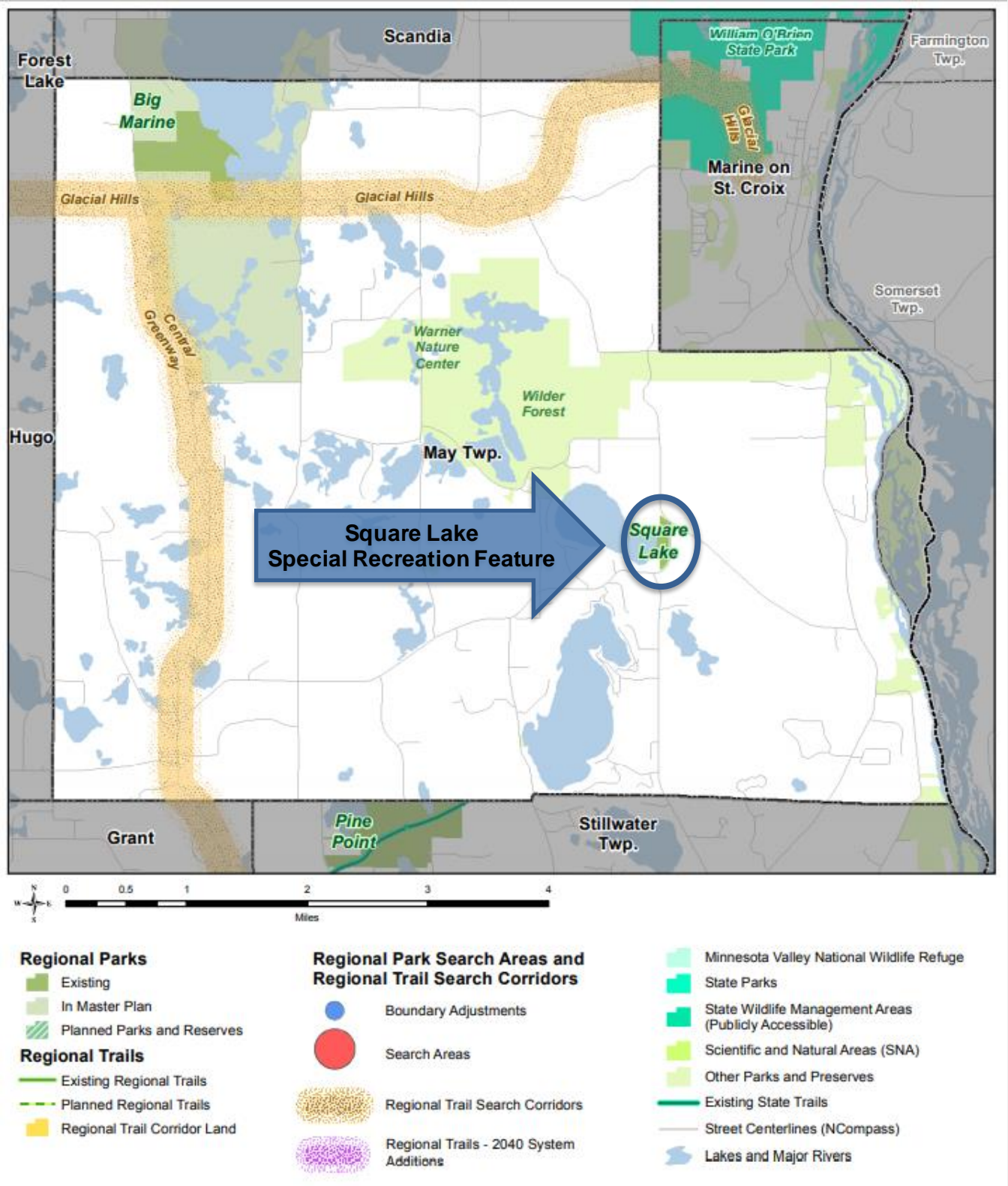
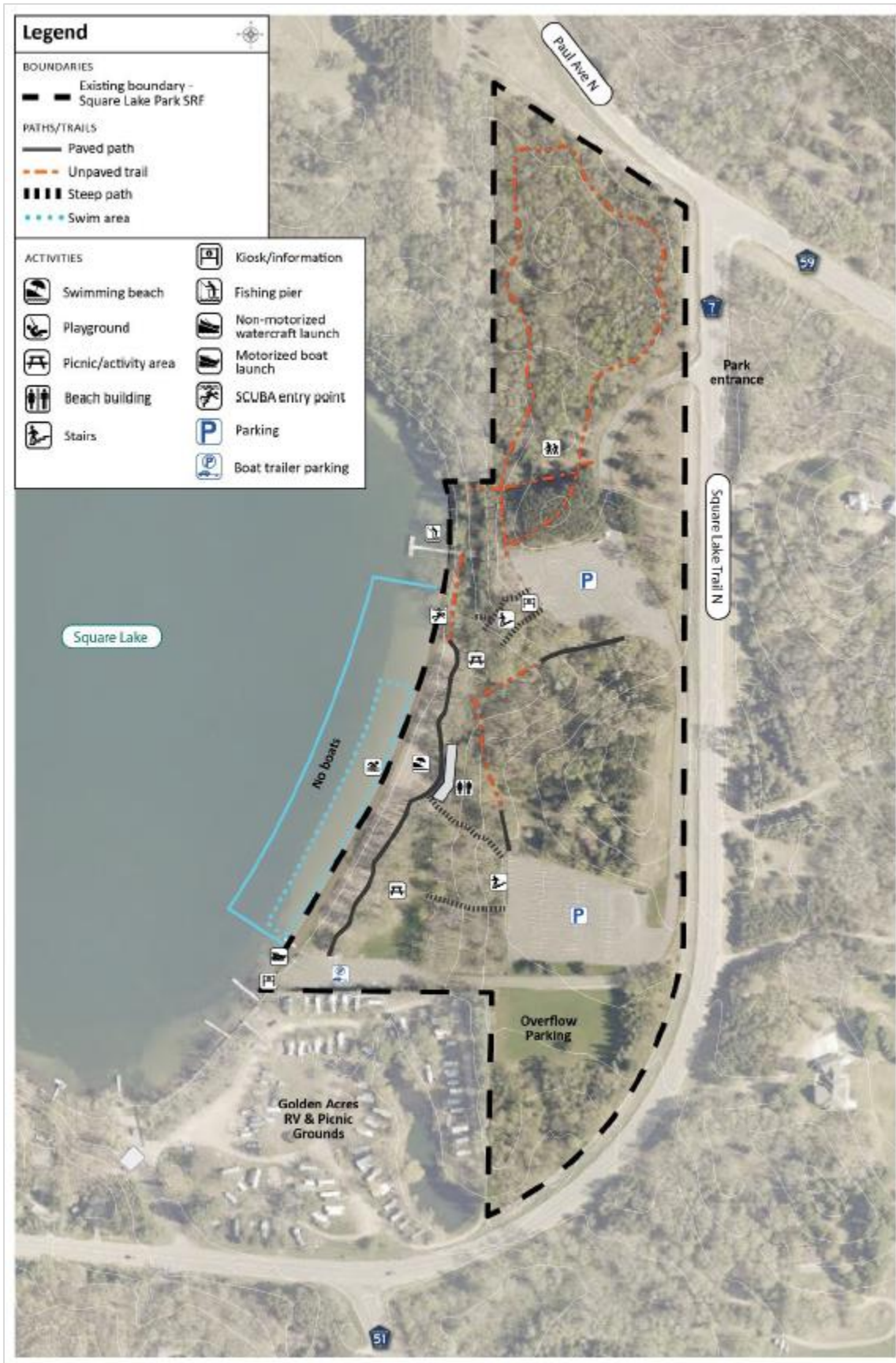


Figure 3: Square Lake Park Existing Conditions (Master Plan Figure 1.3)



Rationale

The Plan is consistent with the requirements of the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*, including Planning Strategy 1, Master Planning, and other Council policies, as described in the attached Analysis.

Thrive Lens Analysis

The Plan advances the Thrive outcome of Livability by increasing access to nature and outdoor recreation, which enhances quality of life in the region. This master plan also advances the Stewardship outcome through responsibly managing the region's finite resources including conserving quality natural resources.

Funding

The Plan estimates \$1,760,804 in acquisition costs; \$8,696,116 in development and infrastructure costs; and \$543,200 in natural resource management costs. These estimates include acquisition-contingent development and trail improvements, and native plant community restoration and maintenance. The Plan also estimates \$2,711,434 in design, engineering, construction, and implementation contingencies. The overall estimated costs are \$13,711,554.

Approval of the Plan does not commit the Council to any funding at this time. The acquisition and development costs based on this master plan may be awarded through the Parks Acquisition Opportunity Fund, Regional Parks Bonding Program, and the Parks and Trails Legacy Fund Program. Further Council action is required to authorize state and Council funds for regional parks implementing agencies.

Known Support / Opposition

The Washington County Board of Commissioners unanimously adopted Resolution 2021-019, a Resolution Supporting Submittal of the Square Lake Special Recreation Feature Master Plan to Metropolitan Council, on February 9, 2021 (Attachment 1).

The May Township Board of Supervisors also unanimously adopted Resolution 2021-03, a Resolution Supporting the Washington County Square Lake Special Recreation Feature Master Plan, on March 4, 2021 (Attachment 2).

Letters of support were received from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and Carnelian-Marine-St. Croix Watershed District (Attachments 3 and 4).

There is no known opposition to the Master Plan.

Analysis

Planning Strategy 1 of the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan* requires that master plans for regional parks address the eleven items detailed below.

Public Engagement and Participation

Plan development was led by a project management team (PMT) comprised of Washington County and consulting staff. The PMT met throughout the project and was responsible for managing development of the Plan, reviewing existing conditions and public input, and identifying park improvements in line with the long-term vision of the special recreation feature.

Engaging park users and the public was important throughout the planning process and specifically during the investigation and evaluation phases. Washington County places high value on the input process to ensure that the improvements identified in this plan align with the desires of current and future user groups. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the planning process was initiated with the awareness that the public engagement plan would need to be adjusted to meet safety requirements developed by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), State of Minnesota, and Washington County. Washington County acknowledged that the public process must maintain the same transparency and accessibility expected by our partners and the public.

As the magnitude of the pandemic became apparent, it was necessary for virtual meeting discussions to replace many outreach efforts to ensure participant and staff safety. A few in-person discussions were still able to occur during the inventory phase; between the consultant and Washington County staff and between the consultant and park goers by practicing CDC guidelines through mask use and social distancing. Despite these changes, the project teams felt that ample information was made available to the public and that the feedback received was valuable and representative of current and potential park users. The engagement tools used during the master plan process are outlined below.

Project website

Washington County hosted a project website throughout the planning process to act as a primary source for sharing information related to planning efforts. This included adopted project goals, displays prepared to accompany a public input survey, and proposed improvements for public consideration.

County Newsletter

The Washington County newsletter, *Staying In Touch*, is sent to all county residents and is one of the primary ways the county shares information. The Square Lake planning process was featured in the summer 2020 edition. The story introduced the project and asked people to visit the project website. This approach effectively spread the word about the planning process and increased public awareness.

Online Engagement Event #1

This event was held to solicit input on park use, existing conditions, and desired improvements. The online engagement event replaced the previously planned Open House #1 due to COVID-19 restrictions and concern for the safety of attendees. Signage advertising this opportunity was placed at Square Lake. Flyers were also posted at local businesses and nearby schools. To help increase awareness, local organizations and outdoor equity groups were identified and contacted. Additionally, the public was made aware of the event through project team connections and social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Nextdoor, and Instagram.

The event included project information, an online survey, and an interactive comment map. The survey collected input on park use, existing experiences, and desired improvements. There were 1,200 website visits and 616 survey responses associated with this online engagement event.

Targeted Stakeholder Outreach

The project team solicited feedback from multiple stakeholder groups with jurisdictional responsibilities at Square Lake to supplement public input from the first online engagement event. These discussions included feedback on current park conditions as well as potential future improvements.

- Outreach occurred with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and Carnelian-Marine-St. Croix Watershed District to review potential improvements related to water quality. Washington County received letters of support from both agencies (Attachments 3 and 4).
- Presented to May Township Board of Supervisors and received resolution of support (Attachment 2).
- Park maintenance staff provided targeted feedback as part of an on-site review. This feedback focused on conditions of existing infrastructure and issues related to seasonal or storm events. Staff provided a list of potential improvements.

Listening Sessions and Site Visits with Underserved Populations

Outreach occurred with underrepresented populations through targeted listening sessions. Washington County met with representatives of Outdoor Latino Minnesota to tour the park and discuss opportunities to improve the park experience for Latinx communities. Key findings included developing culturally sensitive programming, providing easy and clean bathroom access, picnic and group gathering spaces, and public safety. These findings were used to inform the Plan's goals and proposed recommendations.

An on-site review of accessibility in the park occurred with Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commissioner Todd Kemery. Kemery is a member of the Paralyzed Veterans of America and an accomplished adaptive scuba diver. Key findings included identifying trail grade challenges, accessible park amenities (including mobility beach mats, accessible boat/scuba launch, accessible fishing pier), and signage improvements.

Online Engagement Event #2

This event was held to solicit input on potential park improvements, review draft concept displays, and confirm direction of the Plan relative to input received during the first online engagement event. Feedback helped the design team refine potential improvements. As with previous outreach tools, the online engagement tool was used because of concerns with the ongoing pandemic.

This input opportunity was promoted in a similar fashion as the first online engagement event. Participants were made aware of the event through project team and community group connections. Flyers were also posted at local businesses and nearby schools. Additionally, Washington County leveraged social media platforms. There were 609 website visits and 30 survey responses associated with this online engagement event.

Public Engagement Outcomes

The public engagement opportunities provided the county and project team with a broad understanding of existing concerns and improvement opportunities at Square Lake Park. Input was concentrated in the Twin Cities region, but responses spanned from Duluth to St. Peter geographically.

The following list highlights key findings from the public engagement opportunities and subsequent project team meetings:

- Square Lake is visited and loved by both local residents and people all over the region.
- Protecting and enhancing water quality and clarity is a key priority.
- Significant demand for improving non-motorized watercraft site amenities and programming
- Preservation of natural, scenic setting is desired.

- Improvements are needed to better connect and access upper and lower areas of the park .
- Crowding at the beach and high use of the lake impacts the park user experience .
- People are interested in visiting and using the park more in non-summer months.
- The restroom facility was highlighted by many users, who identified the importance of improving and maintaining it.
- Develop additional trails and explore opportunities to complement existing uses .
- Proposed acquisitions will add value to the park and region through conservation of natural resources and low-impact park improvements.

Partner Engagement

A technical advisory committee (TAC) was created for interagency collaboration, review of existing conditions, and discussion of improvement opportunities at Square Lake. In addition to Washington County employees across multiple divisions, the TAC was comprised of representatives from the following partner agencies, organizations, and advisory committees:

- Minnesota Department of Natural Resources
- Metropolitan Council
- Washington Conservation District
- Washington County Park and Open Space Commission
- Carnelian-Marine-St. Croix Watershed District
- May Township
- Square Lake Homeowners Association
- Square Lake Film and Music Festival

As part of the project kickoff meeting, the TAC members explored desired outcomes and goals for the overall plan and analyzed the park using a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats exercise. The TAC was engaged throughout the planning process and reviewed findings related to existing conditions, public engagement summaries, and potential park improvements.

Equity Analysis

Project Data

Washington County conducted an examination of the public engagement process and outcomes for stakeholders by race, ethnicity, national origin, income, ability, age, and other pertinent characteristics.

Washington County focused on engaging existing and potential park users within a 30-minute travel shed. Although usage and constituent population vary by park type, the 30-minute travel shed is presented as a general guideline on the size of the population most likely to visit a regional park. The National Recreation and Park Association's (NRPA) Facility Market Report provided the county with statistics on the residents served by the park within this travel shed (Table 1).

Table 1: 2010 Census Data and 2020 and 2025 Forecast of People Residing with a 30-minute drive - Race and Ethnicity

Race & Ethnicity	Census 2010		2020 Forecast		2025 Forecast	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
White Alone	205,948	90.2%	215,306	86.5%	220,201	84.2%
Black Alone	6,441	2.8%	9,630	3.9%	11,850	4.5%
American Indian Alone	1,088	0.5%	1,232	0.5%	1,342	0.5%
Pacific Islander Alone	82	0.0%	159	0.1%	203	0.1%
Some Other Race Alone	1,887	0.8%	2,702	1.1%	3,257	1.2%
Two or More Races	4,438	1.9%	6,601	2.7%	8,063	3.1%
Hispanic Origin (Any Race)	6,419	2.8%	9,154	3.7%	11,125	4.3%

On a county-wide level, underserved communities were identified in the Metropolitan Council-commissioned Regional Parks System Visitor Study (2016)¹. This report provides benchmark data of park and trail visitor experiences at regional parks and trails, aggregated by implementation agency. Key findings from the report included:

- Compared to the overall Washington County population, disparities in Washington County park and trail visitation included:
 - Age
 - Household income
 - Educational attainment
 - Physical or mental ability

The Plan recognizes the impacts that past decisions have had on the present-day inequitable outcomes experienced at Square Lake and the regional park system. An example of this is the historic segregation of access to swimming and development of swimming skills by race and ethnicity. The impact of this history is found in the disparities experience by these communities today. For example, a report from the Minnesota Safety Council found:

- For all ages, American Indians/Alaska Natives had the highest drowning rate, twice that of whites; the rate for African Americans was 1.4 times the rate for whites.
- Drowning rates for black children were significantly higher than those for whites and Hispanics at every age from five years through 18 years.
- Factors such as the physical environment (e.g., access to swimming pools) and a combination of social and cultural issues (e.g., fear of drowning; choosing or not choosing recreational water-related activities) may contribute to these differences in drowning rates.

Public Engagement and Participation

Washington County strives to provide an inclusive public engagement process for its park planning efforts. To reach a diverse cross-section of the community and to engage people of diverse races, ethnicities, classes, ages, abilities and national origin, the project team developed a plan to provide information to the public in multiple ways with an emphasis on trying to make it easy and accessible for

¹ <https://metro council.org/Parks/Publications-And-Resources/PARK-USE-REPORTS/VISITOR-STUDY-REPORTS/2016-Regional-Parks-Sytem-Visitor-Study-Report-N.aspx>

people to participate in the planning process. The public engagement strategies are outlined on pages 5-7 of this report.

It is important to note self-reported demographics gathered from the initial online survey demonstrated a need to supplement these engagement strategies with additional outreach. An example that highlights this work is the listening sessions and site visits the project team conducted with two representatives of underserved groups, including Latinx park users and people with different abilities. This targeted outreach is outlined on page 7 of this report and is an example of “Collaborate” on the International Association for Public Participation’s Public Participation Spectrum.

Feedback received during engagement events and listening sessions were synthesized with all the project findings into themes and goals that guided the Plan. Specifically, 17 of the 23 outcomes/goals directly address comments and input received by the underserved populations that the project team engaged with:

- Access improvements
 - Enhance visitor experience: welcoming arrival, clear parking, accessible circulation between park destinations
 - Heighten awareness of the park
 - Improve access and connectivity to the local community and region
 - Preserve public access and opportunities to experience Square Lake
 - Preserve and enhance diversity of visitors, including among income, race, ethnicity, and age
- Recreational use
 - Expanding recreational opportunities for year-round use
 - Maintain and improve existing facilities
 - Consider new or expanded facilities to accommodate new activities and users
 - Reduce barriers for underrepresented users
 - Expand opportunities for park programming
- Infrastructure improvements
 - Provide universal access to park facilities/amenities (ADA) to every extent possible
 - Enhance gathering space to accommodate large and small groups
- Water quality protection
 - Protect water quality and clarity of Square Lake
 - Provide interpretive opportunities that highlight the importance of water quality
- Natural resource protection
 - Identify natural communities for preservation, protection, and restoration for enjoyment by future generations
 - Provide interpretive opportunities that highlight the important natural resources within the park
 - Develop and implement a plan for continued canopy regeneration for future use

Evaluation Summary

In addition to the overall guiding project themes and goals, public engagement with underserved groups impacted the proposed capital improvement and natural resource concept plan, including those items referenced above.

The targeted engagement led to a better and more inclusive master plan. Through this process, Washington County was able to create relationships and build trust with community stakeholders. For

example, the site visit and listening session with Outdoor Latino included discussion about future programming opportunities, not only at Square Lake, but at other parks across the Washington County system.

Finally, targeted underserved groups were followed up with as the final draft plan was out for public comment. Washington County will continue to engage the community on the future implementation of the Plan.

Demand Forecast

To better understand those who are most likely to visit Square Lake, Washington County defined a service area to examine demographics within a 30-minute drive of the special recreation feature. Square Lake's service area includes over 417,000 residents and 159,306 households in eastern Minnesota and western Wisconsin. The median age is slightly over 40 years old and is 82% white. The median household income is \$81,865 and the median home value is \$276,266. Renters make up 23% of the households in the service area.

Square Lake is used by both local and regional residents, with many visitors living within the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Nearly 80% of visitors travel 30 miles or less to get to the park and tend to spend about 48 minutes there. 40% of visitors come from households with kids, and household income and education are fairly evenly distributed. The county has observed use of Square Lake amenities by a mix of individuals and families from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Among these are Latino, Hmong, and people of Somali descent.

As part of efforts to understand usage and user experience, the project team hosted a series of online user surveys and engagement sessions to gather user feedback. Findings from this outreach reveal a unique regional amenity highly sought after for its natural beauty, particularly access to the lake's pristine water. However, this amenity is also driving increased use, stressing the park's services. The beach area is becoming increasingly crowded, with respondents noting a resulting diminished visitor experience. Similarly, there was an expressed demand for improving nonmotorized watercraft amenities and programming. While the summer months continue to be the busiest of year, respondents expressed a clear interest in using Square Lake during non-summer months. The outreach feedback the County received is consistent with the usage data gathered by Metropolitan Council and other partners, particularly the anticipated demand increases stemming from projected local and regional population growth.

Special attention should be given to anticipated demand of amenities that accommodate all ages and abilities. Nearly three fourths of county households have children, which have varying comfort levels with park services. The county's 65+ age demographic is also anticipated to grow significantly over the next ten years, which requires planning for park services through the lens of user ability. Likewise, nearly 20% of Americans have a disability that impacts major life activities.

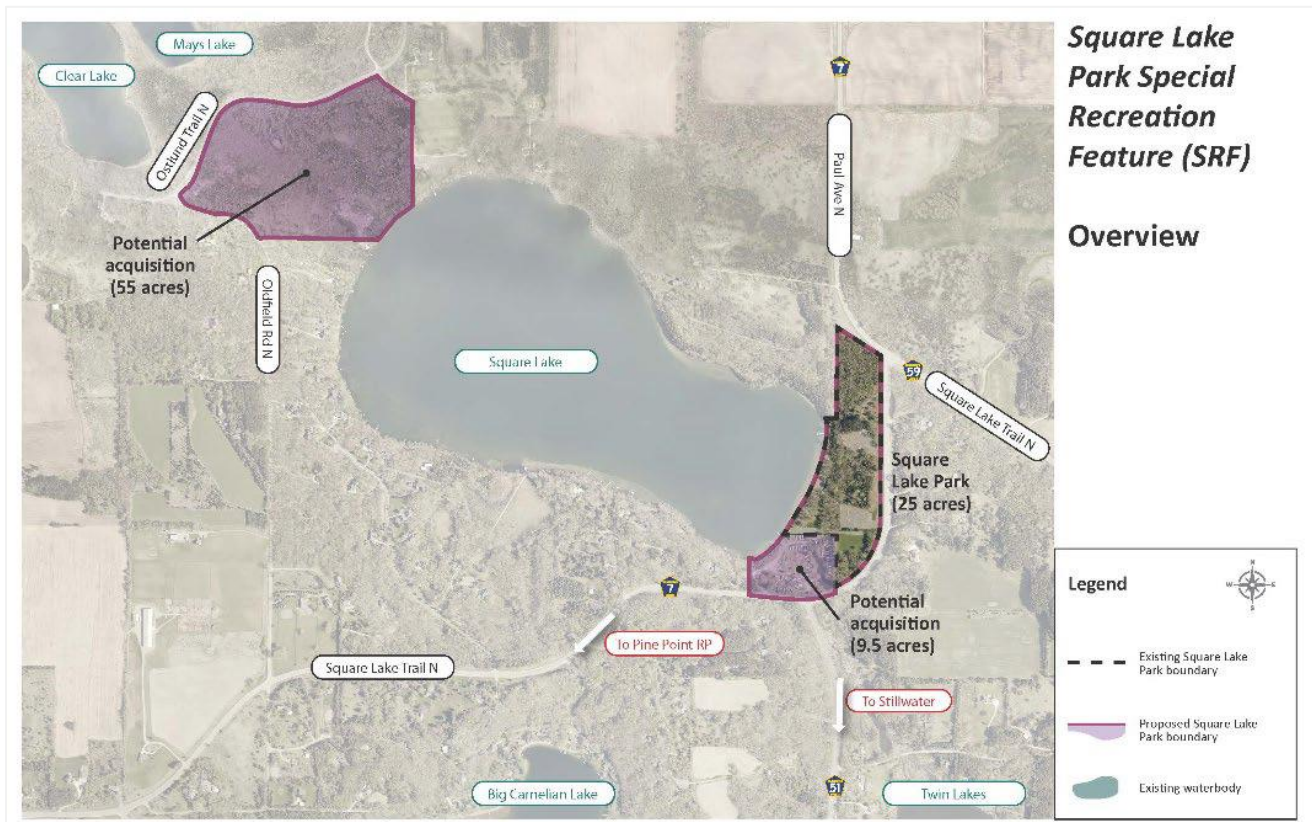
Square Lake must also adapt to growing population diversity, while considering equity in access and experience. Populations of color are quickly growing in the County, increasing from 7.5% in 2000 to nearly 18% in 2019. Demographic changes need to be understood to combat regional disparities in park access and usage, while ensuring the amenities provided meet the needs of the diverse communities that use this area.

Boundaries and Acquisition

To further improve park resources and accommodate growing demand, two locations near Square Lake have been identified for potential acquisition (Figure 4). Through the master plan process, these sites

were identified for their ability to address project goals and match the criteria for Square Lake’s inclusion into the regional park system. This additional land will allow the county to better protect areas around the lake while providing opportunities for people to experience the outdoors. Washington County’s current practice for park land acquisition is on a ‘willing-seller’ basis. The projected timing and sequencing for acquiring any of the land identified in this master plan will be ultimately determined by funding and the timing of parcel availability.

Figure 4: Proposed Acquisitions and Future Park Boundary (Master Plan Fig. 5.2)



Golden Acres RV and Picnic Area

One site being considered for potential park expansion is the Golden Acres RV and Picnic Area, a roughly 9.5 acres site immediately south of Square Lake. Located on relatively flat terrain, this property currently operates as an RV campground and picnic area, while also providing lake access to scuba divers, motorboats, and non-motorized watercraft enthusiasts.

Acquisition would provide additional natural resource protections to the lake through conservation and restoration. Golden Acres would also provide opportunities to design accessible and environmentally sustainable facilities providing more universal access to the lake, a separation of motorized and non-motorized watercraft and the expansion of amenities already adjacent to the existing park.

The proposed concept shifts the non-motorized watercraft and scuba access, while motorized boat access would remain at the current park launch. A separate boat launch for non-motorized watercraft will make this popular activity safer and more accessible. Furthermore, the master plan recommends that the county explore future opportunities to provide rental equipment for the public.

Additionally, an expanded trail network will provide connections within and through the park. Camping will remain an ongoing consideration with the proposed concept retaining a portion of the camping

opportunities that exist at Golden Acres today. A playground and shelter are also being considered towards providing additional year-round amenities for park patrons.

Wilder Property Parcel

The master planning process identified 55 acres owned by the Wilder Foundation south of Ostlund Trail as land that best met the criteria for inclusion in the park's future boundary. The site is located on the northwest shore of Square Lake, is largely wooded, and was previously used as a youth camp. Acquisition of this property would allow Washington County to further expand natural features while providing additional protection to areas draining toward Square Lake. It would also introduce new features not feasible in the existing park: a larger network of trails, programming space, and passive lake access.

New amenities would promote connections to the site's natural elements, with potential access to a wider range of natural habitats.

More site-specific inventory and analysis is needed to determine the suitability of site features, and potential for renovation or remodeling to accommodate future uses as described by this master plan.

Stewardship Plan

Each year, Washington County budgets for the operation of its parks system in coordination with the Metropolitan Council. This budgeting process provides resources that allow for facility maintenance and natural resource management. This funding originates from these primary sources:

- Operations and maintenance grants from State General Funds and lottery in-lieu of sales tax funds
- County levy
- Vehicle permits

The anticipation is that future Square Lake Park improvements and expansion will allow for increased attendance, thereby generating additional park revenue. As new amenities are incorporated, such as improved trails, water recreation amenities, and wetlands education facilities, new revenue sources should be explored and leveraged.

Conflicts

In general, the existing park features and land uses affecting Square Lake complement the surrounding land uses. For example, the special recreation feature is well buffered from neighboring properties and is setback from the county road. Some concerns from neighbors included views of the park from the lake. To address these concerns, the Plan proposes additional vegetation along the shoreline that will screen the beach, beach building, and lower parking lots, and have stormwater and ecological benefits. Washington County will continue to work collaboratively with neighbors to identify and address concerns.

During the planning process, several comments were received regarding user conflicts. This includes motorized boat users and non-motorized watercraft users sharing one drop-off area and launch area. The proposed capital improvement concept plan addresses this by planning for separated launch and drop-off area. Furthermore, public feedback included safety concerns of the motorized boat use and non-motorized boat use on the lake. Plan recommendations include signage to better communicate regulations and expectations to motorized watercraft users who use the park to access the lake.

Park capacity is another concern that is experienced during Square Lake's peak visitation periods. The Plan seeks to balance additional parking and traffic impacts with providing a safe experience for park users. It is important to note that these peak visitation events are typically limited to a few weekends a

year and for most of the year, the park is not reaching capacity. The Plan proposes adding additional park improvements in strategic locations to provide additional recreational options away from the more crowded beach and picnic area. These uses will also help in nonpeak seasons.

Development Concept

Community and partner engagement determined a desire to focus on enhancing the park's infrastructure to address stormwater runoff while also enhancing the park's ecological qualities. The public also indicated an interest in further developing recreational amenities with Square Lake while expanding opportunities outside of the primary May through August park use timeframe.

A non-motorized watercraft launch and rental opportunities are proposed north of the existing boat launch. If proposed acquisitions occur, this will shift to the newly acquired property. Other accommodations include improvements to the existing boat launch and new signage educating park users about responsibilities related to aquatic invasive species.

Other new features would include a new small group picnic shelter by the fishing pier, improvements to the fishing pier to better accommodate people with different abilities and needs, and expanded shoreline fishing amenities.

To better provide for visitors at the swimming beach and picnic areas, the Plan calls for renovation and expansion of the beach building. The existing structure is well used and requires ongoing maintenance. For example, the facility ventilation needs to be addressed. Improved access is needed from parking lots to this facility and other park amenities, as well as expanding the restrooms and shower facilities with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility upgrades. As upgrades are considered, the county should look at opportunities for accommodating potential future programming events and/or material storage space related to these uses. Throughout the park, this Plan encourages the introduction of ADA accessible grills and picnic tables.

A few improvements are targeted towards water quality and visibility concerns. This includes use of shoreline restoration and vegetation to mitigate the presence of paved surfaces and vehicles from the lake viewshed. It also includes careful consideration of available parking and potentially limiting motorized boat access from the park.

Square Lake currently provides limited trail opportunities. Additional trail development is needed to provide more accessible connections between park destinations, while expanding facilities for walking, hiking and snow shoeing throughout the year.

Public input supports infrastructure for the purpose of designating a trail segment near the overflow parking lot as a fitness loop. A fitness trail consists of a path with outdoor exercise equipment or obstacles installed along its length for exercising to promote good health. This was a popular request from the community, and it is not an amenity currently offered at other Washington County parks.

The approximately 4.3-mile Pine Point Regional Park to Square Lake Special Recreation Feature Regional Trail Search Corridor will provide a future bike and pedestrian connection between these two units of the Regional Parks System. Washington County will continue to be open to opportunities that would link this special recreation feature to the larger trail network, such as the Gateway State Trail. Some of the shared trails along the entry road are recommended not only for bike riders who may visit the park currently but also to provide for this infrastructure once this park can be connected to the larger trail network.

The variety of trails and amenities, along with stormwater improvements and ecological restoration practices offer unique opportunities for wayfinding and signage. With the potential for future acquisition,

it will be important to continue using uniform signage throughout the park; helping to orient visitors to site features, denote trails, communicate rules and regulations, and help interpret natural systems and park features.

Design of wayfinding and interpretive signage should be consistent to provide clear messaging throughout the park. It should also adhere to the Washington County brand, so park guests recognize the jurisdiction overseeing Square Lake and its facilities.

The Plan outlines three phases for capital improvements. Phase 1 is for improvements proposed within one to five years, Phase 2 is for six to ten years, and Phase 3 if for ten plus years. Phase 3 improvements are contingent on proposed acquisitions.

Accessibility

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1991 (ADA) was a landmark civil rights legislation prohibiting discrimination based on disability. The ADA and subsequent regulations contain technical requirements for accessibility and usage of sites, facilities, buildings, and elements by individuals with different needs and abilities. ADA requirements are to be applied during, “design, construction, additions to, and alteration of sites, facilities, buildings, and elements to the extent feasible.” The main applicability of ADA for the Square Lake Special Recreation Feature Master Plan is in the physical accessibility requirements for public accommodations.

As it prepares for plan implementation, Washington County intends to use this master plan and the Washington County ADA Transition Plan to provide guidance for accessibility standards for proposed improvements.

Public Services

The Plan recognizes that the existing maintenance road, while providing an important service for ongoing maintenance, also establishes a direct connection from the upper portion to the lower park and lake by which stormwater runoff and erosion can be conveyed to Square Lake. This Plan therefore encourages upgrades to that maintenance road that will reduce erosion and limit transference of stormwater to the lower park.

Furthermore, the second phase of capital improvement recommendations – to occur between five and ten years from plan adoption – includes improved parking lots with integrated stormwater best management practices.

Lastly, if the Golden Acres acquisition occurs, the Plan recommends reconstructing the access road reconstruction and closing the existing entry.

Operations

Washington County parks are operated and managed through use of both full-time and seasonal staff who operate out of Washington County’s Public Works North Shop. The Parks division utilizes an annual budget of approximately \$4 million to operate and maintain the entirety of its park and trail system.

The master plan calls for retaining current maintenance practices, while identifying areas of additional need. The two acquisition opportunities outlined previously in the master plan would add significant additional acreage to Square Lake, thereby requiring additional maintenance and operations. Additional staff, equipment, and services such as waste and recycling may need to be expanded to serve expanded amenities and facilities in these areas.

Public Awareness

Washington County employs a spectrum of strategies to promote awareness and usage of its parks and programming, including social media, direct mailing, park websites, brochures, flyers, and press releases. Of these tools, the most dynamic for outreach are social media and online resources. The Washington County park system website contains general information about the system, including trails, reservations, and permits. A dedicated Square Lake page hosts park-specific information and park updates. Washington County also shares information on Facebook and Twitter, leveraging the ease of access for each platform to communicate real-time information. As with its regionally important park features, Washington County partners with several organizations to publicize the programs, initiatives, events, and facilities at Square Lake.

As the county continues to advertise Square Lake, outreach efforts should be tailored towards reaching audiences of all ages, abilities, races, and ethnicities. Special effort should be given to ensure that messages are provided in multiple languages so that all park visitors are provided equal access to messaging and park updates. Similarly, a continued balanced approach of online and paper marketing should be deployed to maximize outreach to the widest possible audience.

Natural Resources

Square Lake is a special recreation feature because it provides access to some of the clearest waters in the metropolitan region. Protecting the quality of the water in Square Lake is therefore critical towards preserving this amenity not only to Washington County but residents of the entire metropolitan region. Several factors contribute to water quality including stormwater runoff, groundwater pollution and threats by aquatic invasive species.

Natural resources at Square Lake Special Recreation Feature include Square Lake, a 203-acre public water body with nearly 2.5 miles of shoreline and a maximum depth of 68 feet. The lake has among the best water quality of any lake in the metropolitan area. The lake's Trophic State Index, a measure of water nutrients and corresponding clarity, is 38, denoting an above average level of water clarity compared to other waterbodies in its region. Upland areas of the park are dominated by mixed woodlands, planted pine stands, and oak savanna.

Square Lake is dominated by several wooded areas surrounding open areas that have been developed into lawns for use by park visitors. A tree stand exists at the entrance of the park that is dominated by mixed deciduous trees with an understory dominated by buckthorn. A similar stand is found on the southern portion of the park, though buckthorn does not dominate the understory. The center of the park is dominated by an oak savanna with a mixed understory. There is also a stand of red pines that is likely a remnant of early European forestry practices.

Land cover was mapped at Square Lake using the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' Land Cover Classification System and field verified by ecological experts. Field surveys noted additional needs and opportunities for oak remediation/treatment and stabilization, oak savanna restoration, pine grove management, prairie restoration, shoreline vegetation restoration and protection, wetland restoration at Golden Acres, and invasive plant species control.

A tree survey was conducted on the site in July 2020, which identified an advanced Emerald Ash Borer infestation in the Park. Infected trees comprising this advanced infestation are located along the shoreland area of the park. Ash trees in other areas of the park did not exhibit signs of infestation, but it can be assumed that they may have some level of infestation.

An adaptive management approach is recommended for Square Lake to preserve and enhance the unique resources within the park and properties being considered for potential acquisition. This management approach is an incremental process of testing techniques, observing effectiveness, and adjusting techniques in response. The intent of adaptive management is to guide plant communities into more resilient conditions through:

- Controlling invasive plant species that negatively impact native plant communities.
- Restoring native plant communities by disturbance and supplemental seeding.
- Implementing forest management practices to make forest more resilient.

The Plan recommends that restoration efforts should begin with the areas of highest ecological potential identified through natural resource inventories. These are areas where remnant plant communities are present that can be restored and expanded to provide connections around them. Within these areas, the focus should be on removing invasive species to eliminate competition of impeding native plant regeneration. The goal is to establish a diverse and protected community dominated by native species, and to then repeat this process in areas adjacent to the original area of regeneration.

Like proposed capital improvements, the Plan calls for a phased implementation of natural resource management recommendations. Phase 1 is for improvements proposed within one to five years, Phase 2 is for six to ten years, and Phase 3 if for ten plus years. Phase 3 improvements are contingent on proposed acquisitions.

Climate Change

Annual average temperatures in the Twin Cities increased slightly over three degrees during the period between 1951 and 2012; a rate higher than the national average. Climate trends indicate that Minnesota will become hotter and wetter over the next 50 years with more extreme weather events such as torrential rainfall, heavy snowfall, and drought. Effects may include more extreme heat days, air quality degradation, increased risk of drought and flooding, and impacts to local ecosystems. Natural resources at Square Lake Park are, and will continue to be, impacted by this warming trend.

Square Lake will likely have higher water temperatures and increased water pollution from surface runoff and erosion; factors which will negatively impact conditions in the lake itself. These impacts may have cascading impacts including reduced water clarity, lower oxygen levels, higher nutrient levels, and declining plant and wildlife species abundance.

With climatologists predicting more extreme weather patterns, inclusion of measures proactively preparing Square Lake for hotter temperatures, higher rainfall events, and prolonged periods of drought will help protect these resources. Native plant species more tolerant of warmer temperatures and both wetter and drier conditions should be considered in long range habitat management plans. Increasing the capacity of the park to better adapt to anticipated temperature and rainfall variances will be an essential consideration in the Plan's ability to provide the county with the direction necessary in planning for more resilient park infrastructure and habitats.

Consistency with Other Council Policies and Systems

Community Development – Research (Todd Graham 651-602-1322) – The Washington County Square Lake Master Plan is informed by the Metropolitan Council socioeconomic forecast. The park implementing agency has identified long-term forecasted population growth of the county and also provides a short-term projection for the local visitorshed surrounding the park. Council staff concur with this assessment.

Community Development – Natural Resources (Cameran Bailey 651-602-1212) – Council staff is excited by the integrated approach to stormwater management, water quality management, and natural resource improvements through a phased approach.

Metro Transit – Service Development (Stephen Baisden 612-349-7361) - Metro Transit Route 294 offers the nearest peak period express service eight miles south of Square Lake in downtown Stillwater. Route 294 provides peak-only express service between downtown Stillwater and downtown St. Paul with one trip to downtown Saint Paul during the morning peak and one trip to Stillwater during the afternoon peak.

Given the current transit investments in the corridor, the proposed master plan will likely have a marginal effect on the existing transit network, if any. Further, this master plan is not likely to lead to an extension of the existing transit service. Other potential transit options include Transit Link.

Attachments

Attachment 1: Resolution 2021-019, a Resolution Supporting Submittal of the Square Lake Special Recreation Feature Master Plan to Metropolitan Council, Washington County Board of Commissioners

Attachment 2: Resolution 2021-03, a Resolution Supporting the Washington County Square Lake Special Recreation Feature Master Plan, May Township Board of Supervisors

Attachment 3: Letter of Support, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

Attachment 4: Letter of Support, Carnelian-Marine-St. Croix Watershed District

**BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
WASHINGTON COUNTY, MINNESOTA**

RESOLUTION NO. 2021-019

DATE <u>February 9, 2021</u>	DEPARTMENT <u>Public Works</u>
MOTION BY COMMISSIONER <u>Miron</u>	SECONDED BY COMMISSIONER <u>Kriesel</u>

**RESOLUTION SUPPORTING SUBMITTAL OF THE SQUARE LAKE SPECIAL RECREATION FEATURE
MASTER PLAN TO METROPOLITAN COUNCIL**

WHEREAS, a special recreation feature master plan is required to address the criteria set forth in the Metropolitan Council's 2040 Regional Park Policy Plan to become eligible for Metropolitan Council regional park system designation and funding; and

WHEREAS, the proposed Square Lake Special Recreation Feature master plan provides planning and implementation guidance for the capital improvements, acquisitions, natural resource management, and overall development to create a regional park that meets the needs of Washington County park users; and

WHEREAS, the master planning process for the Square Lake Special Recreation Feature master plan included public engagement events and meetings that provided the opportunity for input from partner agencies and public stakeholders; and

WHEREAS, the draft Square Lake Special Recreation Feature master plan was reviewed and supported by the Washington County Park and Open Space Commission (POSC) on January 21, 2021; and

WHEREAS, the Washington County Board of Commissioners heard a staff presentation on the Square Lake Special Recreation Feature master plan on January 26, 2021.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Washington County Board of Commissioners supports the proposed Square Lake Special Recreation Feature master plan.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Square Lake Special Recreation Feature master plan be submitted to the Metropolitan Council for review and approval.

ATTEST:

DocuSigned by:
Kevin Corbid
BF605C058F3E41A

COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

DocuSigned by:
Lisa Weik
2BDB324A828F467

COUNTY BOARD CHAIR

	YES	NO
MIRON	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
KARWOSKI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
KRIESEL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
JOHNSON	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
WEIK	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Updated: January 2021

**TOWN OF MAY
WASHINGTON COUNTY, MINNESOTA
RESOLUTION NO. 2021 - 03**

**A RESOLUTION SUPPORTING THE WASHINGTON COUNTY SQUARE LAKE
SPECIAL RECREATION FEATURE MASTER PLAN**

WHEREAS, Square Lake Park is located in May Township;

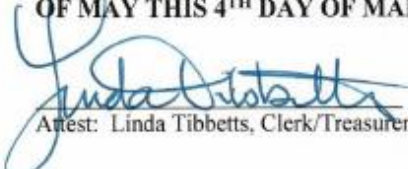
WHEREAS, the proposed Square Lake Special Recreation Feature master plan provides planning and implementation guidance for the capital improvements, acquisitions, natural resource management, and overall development to create a regional park that meets the needs of Washington County park users; and

WHEREAS, the master planning process for the Square Lake Special Recreation Feature master plan included public engagement events and meetings that provided the opportunity for input from partner agencies and public stakeholders; and

WHEREAS, May Township representatives participated in the Square Lake Special Recreation Feature master plan Technical Advisory Committee.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the May Township Board of Supervisors supports the proposed Square Lake Special Recreation Feature master plan.

**BY VOTE OF THE TOWN BOARD: ADAMS: Yes PAZLAR: Yes VOEDISCH: Yes.
THIS RESOLUTION IS ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS OF THE TOWN
OF MAY THIS 4TH DAY OF MARCH, 2021.**


Attest: Linda Tibbetts, Clerk/Treasurer


Bill Voedisch, Board Chair



February 4, 2021

Metropolitan Council Chair and Parks and Open Space Commission
390 North Robert Street
Saint Paul, MN 55101

Hello Chair and Commission Members,

East Metro Area Fisheries is pleased to provide this letter of support for the Square Lake Special Recreation Feature master plan. The park is located in our fisheries management area and is an important part of the regional park system renowned for its access to some of the clearest waters in the metropolitan region. Informed by the interagency and public engagement process, a master plan will provide the vision and direction for the future development of this park for the benefit of all users.

East Metro Area Fisheries supports the improvements proposed in the Square Lake Special Recreation Feature. Existing and future generations of park users will benefit from the proposed improvement to the park's infrastructure and recreational opportunities. This plan also provides essential guidance on the park's ecological functioning by recommending improvements and management practices that will help protect and enhance Square Lake and the surrounding watershed.

Thank you for the opportunity to send our support. We look forward to working with all agency partners on the implementation of the Square Lake Special Recreation Feature master plan.

Regards,

TJ DeBates
East Metro Area Supervisor
1200 Warner Road
Saint Paul, MN 55106



Carnelian-Marine-St. Croix Watershed District

Scandia Plaza II • 21150 Ozark Avenue • P.O. Box 188 • Scandia, MN 55073 • Tel 651.433.2150

4/7/2021

Commissioner Fran Miron
P.O. Box 6
14949 62nd St. North
Stillwater MN 55082-6132

Letter of Support – Square Lake Park Master Plan

Dear Commissioner Miron,

The CMSCWD supports the adoption of the Square Lake Park Master Plan. This 25-acre park is a regional feature renowned for its access to some of the clearest waters in the metropolitan region. This master plan is a product of collaboration with the community and agency stakeholders. The CMSCWD staff served on the Technical Advisory Committee and commend the plan writers for their work engaging stakeholders and capturing the diverse aspirations and concerns for the park.

The Square Lake Park Master Plan provides guidance to implement important management actions for the future health of the lake. These actions are well integrated into future park capital improvements, acquisitions, and natural resource management goals.

The CMSCWD appreciates the goals established to incorporate green infrastructure into park improvements, integrate enhanced stormwater management into parking lot redevelopment, protect water quality and clarity of Square Lake, provide interpretive opportunities to highlight the importance of water quality, continue coordinating operations and management of Square Lake contributing areas, continue Aquatic Invasive Species prevention efforts, and continue to management and restore native upland habitat.

The CMSCWD looks forward to continuing collaborative work with public works and parks to implement these actions efficiently and effectively.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Wade Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Wade Johnson, CMSCWD Board President