

Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission

Meeting date: May 2, 2016

For the Community Development Committee meeting of May 15, 2016

For the Metropolitan Council meeting of May 4, 2016

Subject: Mississippi West Regional Park Master Plan Amendment and Facility Exchange, Anoka County

District(s), Member(s): MPOSC District E, Michael Kopp

Policy/Legal Reference: MN Statutes 473.313; Planning Strategy 1 and System Protection Strategy 2, *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*

Staff Prepared/Presented: Jan Youngquist, AICP, Planning Analyst (651-602-1029)

Division/Department: Community Development/Regional Parks and Natural Resources

Proposed Action

That the Metropolitan Council:

1. Approve the Mississippi West Regional Park Master Plan Amendment.
2. Approve the conversion of 5.31 acres of land within Mississippi West Regional Park needed for the Riverdale Drive frontage road project as shown in Attachment 1, in exchange for the investment of \$200,000—the appraised value of the property—toward the development of improvements in the park including a paved entrance road, parking, and additional trails.
3. Require Anoka County to submit documentation of its \$200,000 investment in the park improvements described above to the Council and inform the County that these costs are not grant eligible expenses.

Background

Mississippi West Regional Park is located south of Highway 10 along the Mississippi River in the city of Ramsey. The 273-acre regional park includes 3.5 miles of shoreline, including two islands within the river. The regional park is largely undeveloped, but includes a boat launch, a small parking lot, observation points, and trails. The current master plan for the park was approved by the Metropolitan Council in March 2011. This master plan amendment proposes to change the planned vehicular entrance to the park, adjust the regional park boundary to accommodate a frontage road extension proposed by the City of Ramsey, add canoe camping sites on the islands, and reprioritize the current phasing of development projects.

The City of Ramsey is proposing to extend Riverdale Drive, a frontage road to Highway 10, east from Traprock Street to Armstrong Boulevard, which will impact a 5.31-acre linear strip of land through the regional park. Anoka County is seeking Council approval of a facility exchange to mitigate the removal of parkland. The appraised value of the 5.31 acres is \$200,000, to be used toward the construction of improvements in the park, which include a paved entrance road, parking, and additional trails.

Rationale

The Mississippi West Regional Park Master Plan Amendment and the facility exchange request are consistent with the requirements of the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*, including Planning Strategy 1, System Protection Strategy 2, and other Council policies.

Thrive Lens Analysis

The Mississippi West Regional Park Master Plan Amendment advances the Thrive outcome of livability through increasing access to nature and outdoor recreation, which enhances quality of life in the region.

Funding

The estimated costs to implement the projects described in the master plan amendment are \$1,053,000. Approval of the facility exchange will require that \$200,000 of the development costs be derived from the funds received from the City of Ramsey for the 5.31 acres of parkland needed for the frontage road extension.

Approval of the master plan does not commit the Council to any funding at this time. The development costs based on this master plan may be awarded through the Regional Parks Capital Improvement Program (CIP) and the Parks and Trails Legacy Fund. Council action is required to approve the CIP, the Parks and Trails Legacy Fund project list, and specific grants to Anoka County.

Known Support / Opposition

The Anoka County Board of Commissioners approved and adopted the master plan amendment on April 11, 2017 and the City of Ramsey passed a resolution of support on April 25, 2017. There is no known opposition to the master plan amendment or the facility exchange.

Analysis

Master Plan Amendment

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

Boundaries and Acquisition

Mississippi West Regional Park currently contains 273 acres and approximately 3.5 miles of shoreline along the Mississippi River, including Foster and Cloquet Islands. The master plan amendment proposes to remove 5.31 acres from the regional park to accommodate a frontage road extension along Highway 10 proposed by the City of Ramsey, known as Riverdale Drive and outlined in red on Figure 1. Anoka County is proposing a facility exchange to mitigate the removal of parkland by investing the \$200,000 it receives from the City of Ramsey in park improvements. The facility exchange is evaluated later in this business item.

There are no parcels proposed to be acquired for the regional park, so there are no acquisition costs. If the master plan amendment is approved, the regional park will consist of approximately 268 acres. The proposed boundary of Mississippi West Regional Park is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Proposed Boundary of Mississippi West Regional Park



Stewardship

Mississippi West Regional Park is primarily undeveloped, so stewardship of the park has focused on nature resource management and restoration. Anoka County has restored fallow farm fields to native prairie and grasslands. Future restoration projects are proposed within the riparian area along the river and to the riverbank itself as well as planting a diverse variety of shrubs and trees to increase the biodiversity within the park.

Demand Forecast

Outdoor recreation patterns in the region have been growing steadily. These patterns have also been seen in Anoka County. Recreational visits to Anoka County regional parks and trails have increased from approximately 2.7 million visits in 2010 to over 3.4 million visits in 2015. Mississippi West Regional Park had almost 200,000 visits in 2015. Visitation is anticipated to grow after additional park development has been completed.

Regional parks and trails have been increasing in popularity, along with population growth. As the population in the region continues to grow, additional recreation resources and amenities should also be provided. Anoka County's population is expected to grow approximately 32 percent between 2010 and 2040, when the estimated County population will be 438,820. During this same time period, the City of Ramsey's population is forecast to grow almost 47 percent, with an estimated population of 34,700.

The historical increase in recreational visits to regional parks and trails, coupled with the projected population growth of Anoka County and the City of Ramsey indicate an increase in future demand for recreational facilities.

Through its community engagement, Anoka County found that hiking, picnic areas, and biking were the top three preferred amenities and activities of survey respondents, which will be accommodated by the proposed development in the park.

Development Concept

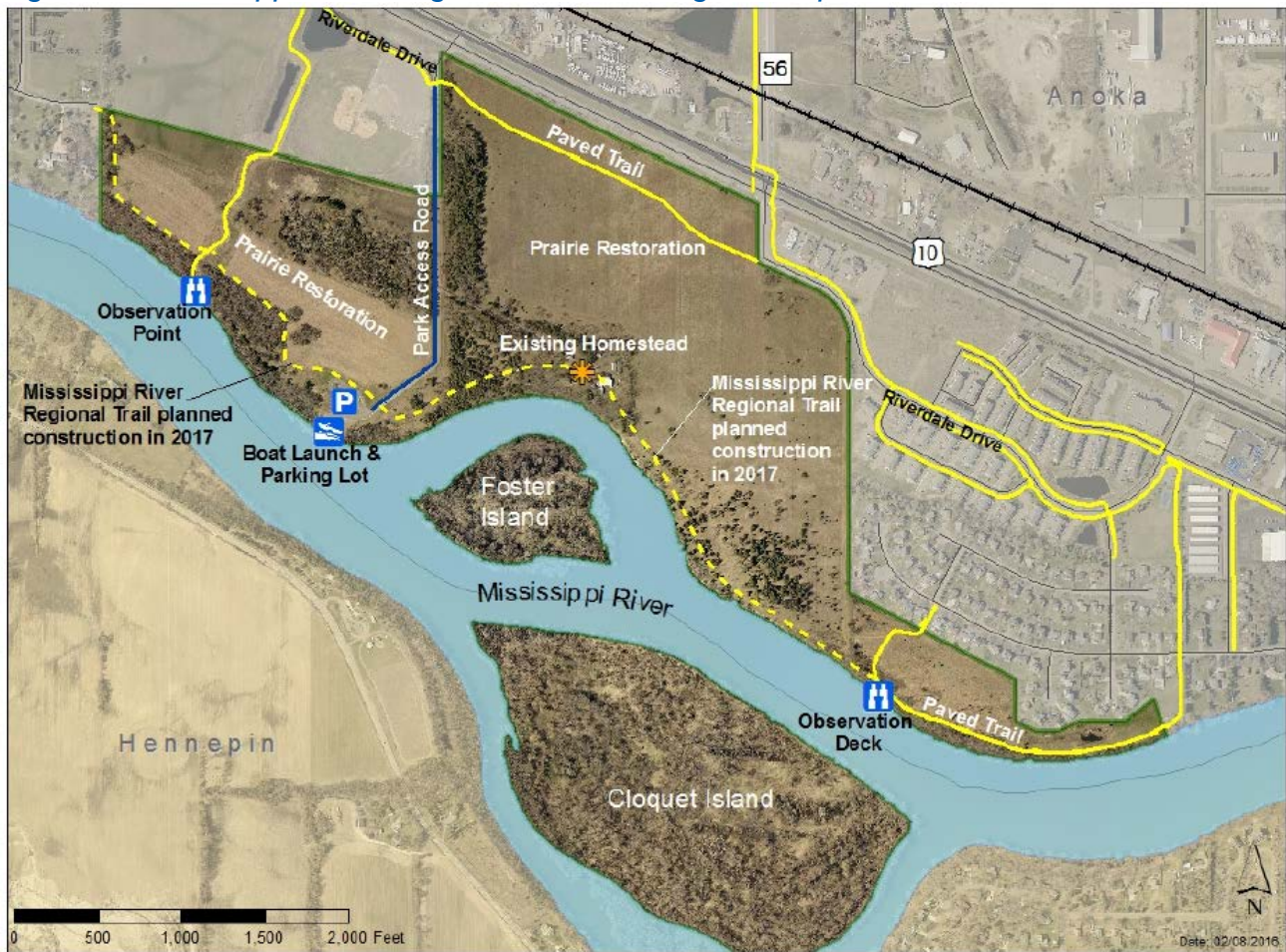
The master plan for Mississippi West Regional Park that was approved by the Council in March 2011 had a development concept that included a boat launch, visitor center, a playground, picnic area, trails, observation decks, infrastructure, and other amenities, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: 2011 Master Plan Development Concept



Development of a gravel roadway, boat launch and an associated paved parking lot, trails, and two observation points has occurred since 2011. These improvements are shown on Figure 3.

Figure 3: Mississippi West Regional Park Existing Development



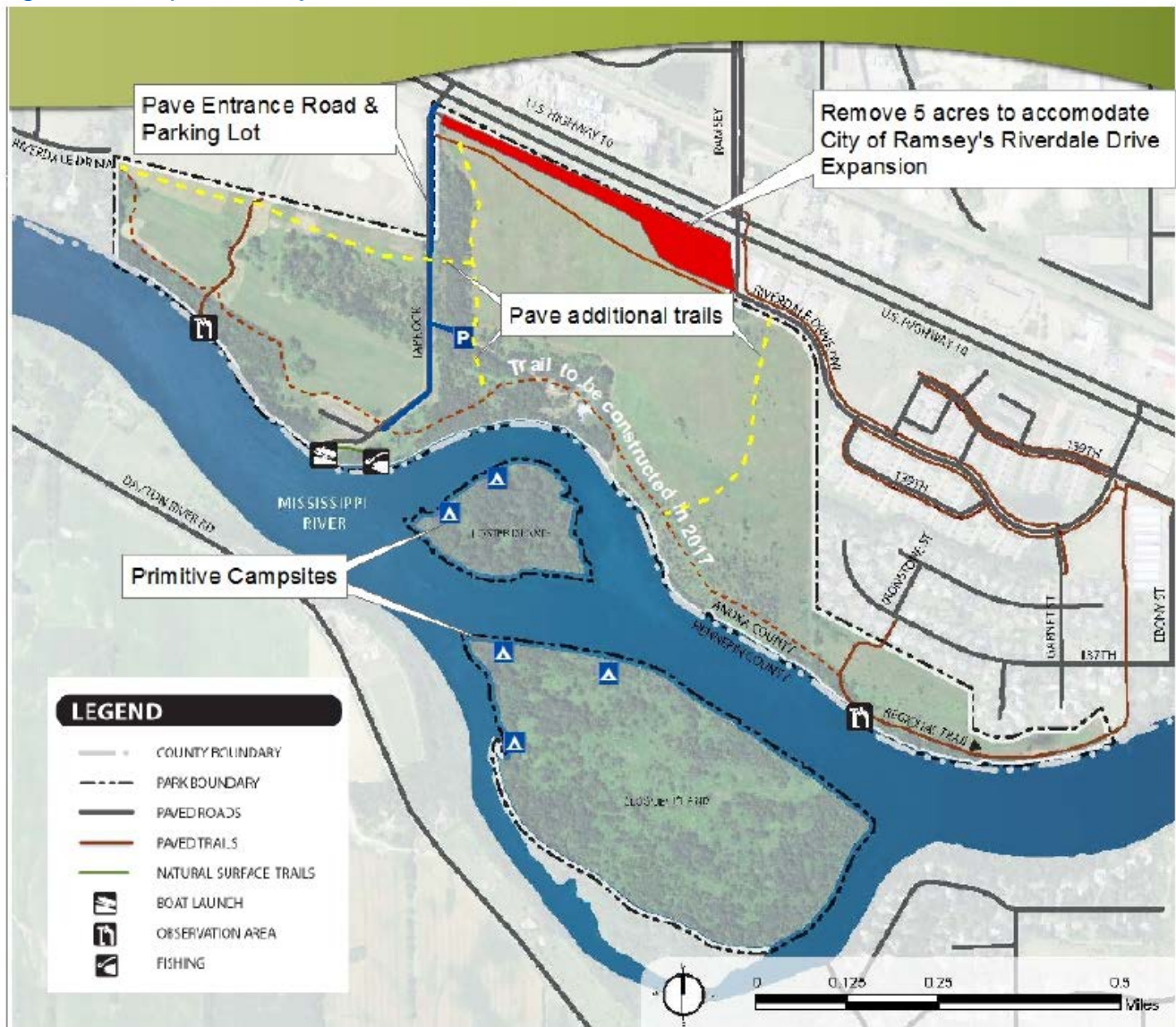
This master plan amendment proposes changes to the 2011 master plan, including relocating the planned vehicle entrance from the northeast side of the park off Ramsey Boulevard to use Traprock Street on the central-west portion of the park. This will reduce fragmentation of the regional park by the entrance road. The existing access road will need to be reconstructed and widened to allow safe two-way traffic. A small parking lot, trails, and three to five canoe campsites on Foster and Cloquet Islands are also proposed in the master plan amendment. The canoe campsites will be primitive and served with a latrine. Wayfinding within the park will include a monument sign near the vehicle entrance, directional signs along the roadway and trails, and trailhead signs at trailheads that will provide an overview of the park that will help users orient themselves to the park.

The estimated development costs for the projects proposed in the master plan amendment are \$1,053,000, as listed in Figure 4. These locations of these projects are depicted in Figure 5.

Figure 4: Estimated Costs of Proposed Projects Added to the Master Plan

Project Description	Estimated Development Cost
Roadway, trail, parking lot	\$643,000
Canoe campsites	\$10,000
Signage	\$50,000
Utility Connections	\$350,000
Total Development Cost	\$1,053,000

Figure 5: Proposed Projects Added to the Master Plan



The remaining projects outlined in the 2011 master plan are still planned, although the phasing timeline has changed. Anoka County is planning to construct the majority of the infrastructure including roads, parking lots and trails, one to two picnic shelters, a restroom, a playground, and a maintenance

facility within the next five to ten years. The remaining picnic shelters, restrooms, visitor center, and other facilities identified in the 2011 master plan will be implemented in the next 15-20 years as funding allows. The revised development concept is shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Revised Development Concept for Mississippi West Regional Park



Conflicts

The park is adjacent to Highway 10 and the City of Ramsey’s proposed frontage road extension. The master plan proposes vegetative screening to buffer the park from these roads in order to enhance the safety, aesthetics, and quality of park users’ experiences.

Construction of the frontage road will impact some of the native prairie and grassland restorations that have been done within the park. Areas that are temporarily impacted by construction will be restored and the County will mitigate unavoidable impacts by restoring other non-native areas within the regional park.

Conflicts between pedestrians and vehicular traffic will be kept to a minimum by reducing the number of trail and road crossings within the park and working with the City of Ramsey to ensure safe crossings at intersections with city roads, which may include signing, striping, and signalization. Signs within the park will alert users of crossings and will also provide wayfinding and interpretive information.

Public Services

The regional park is mostly undeveloped, therefore there are no public utility services currently available within the park. Future development of the pavilion and restrooms will include connections to city services for water and sanitary sewer. Sanitary sewer will be accessed northeast of the park and water service will be connected at the Riverdale Drive frontage road.

Operations

Anoka County Ordinance 2012-01 regulates parks and trails under the jurisdiction of Anoka County and is enforced by local police departments and the Anoka County Sheriff's Department. Park Service Specialists provide education to the public regarding ordinances and other park information.

Annual maintenance costs for the regional park are estimated to be approximately \$23,000, which includes staff time for ongoing daily and general routine maintenance including clearing, mowing, sweeping, plowing, debris removal, and sign maintenance, as well as expenses related to equipment, repairs, service contracts and supplies. Operations of the canoe campsites on the islands are intended to be minimal. Anoka County anticipates that the sites will be monitored weekly to ensure they are clean and safe. Signs will notify campers that they need to pack out any trash generated from their use of the site. The City of Ramsey has expressed interest in operating and maintaining the sites for a five-year period or until the park is fully developed. A Joint Powers Agreement between the County and City will be executed prior to development of any campsites.

Once the regional park is fully developed, the annual maintenance costs are estimated to be approximately \$150,000. Annual operating costs are funded through revenue generated from picnic shelter rentals, special events, programs, park entrance fees, and the County's general fund. Supplemental funding is received through the Regional Park Operations and Maintenance Grant Program administered by the Metropolitan Council.

Public Engagement and Participation

Community engagement during the development of the master plan amendment included a variety of meetings and events. Anoka County developed a "Plan Your Parks" marketing strategy to share information about the master plan amendment and gather feedback from community members and governmental agencies. Multi-lingual postings, email blasts, social media, and pop-up events were included.

The County placed picture boards at various locations throughout the County, including libraries and the Driver's License Center, to share the proposed projects and allow the public to comment on their preferred park amenities, preferred trail surfacing, methods of accessing parks, and perceptions of park safety. This method solicited a lot of feedback, but the demographic makeup of respondents was not known.

Social media was used to publicize a short anonymous survey offered in English, Spanish, and Somali. There were 100 responses to the survey and most were from regular park users. The majority of the respondents were female, Caucasian, between 25-64 years of age, and from Anoka County.

Two public event pop-up meetings were conducted. One was held at a local mall during a busy shopping season and the other was held at the County's Blaine Service Center. The mall event was considered a success because it engaged approximately 75 people, half of which were underrepresented minority populations.

The public participation process engaged approximately 400 people, with 132 people providing input through one-on-one discussions at the pop-up events. The top preferred amenities and activities cited through the engagement process include: hiking, picnic areas, biking, swimming, and fishing.

From the public engagement process, Anoka County identified areas for future exploration, including the need to build relationships with minority populations and other underserved groups, identifying other inviting locations for engagement, implementing listening sessions for more in-depth conversations, and building awareness of regional parks and trails.

Public Awareness

Anoka County uses a number of outreach tools to make the public aware of its regional parks and trails. These include public information maps, websites, social media, publications, and brochures. Future public engagement events will include information on the County's regional parks and trails to increase awareness and promote park amenities and recreational opportunities. The regional park is located within the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area, so the County will also work with National Park Service staff to engage the public and provide information regarding Mississippi West Regional Park.

Accessibility

Facilities and amenities proposed in the master plan will be constructed to meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Anoka County charges a daily vehicle entrance fee to many of its regional parks. Fees are not anticipated to be collected at Mississippi West Regional Park until the park is fully developed, which is anticipated in the next 10 to 15 years. Transit access to the park is limited to Metro Transit Route 887 and the Northstar Commuter Rail. In addition, the Anoka County Traveler Transit Link and Metro Transit's dial-a-ride provide transportation services for a minimal fee.

Natural Resources

The land cover within the main portion of the regional park includes a mix of dry and mesic prairie, non-native deciduous and mixed woodlands, and grasslands. Foster Island is comprised of a floodplain forest, and Cloquet Island consists of a mix of grassland as well as non-native deciduous woodland and forest. To manage the natural resources and maintain the park's identity and natural connection to the river, Anoka County will provide for:

- Protection, restoration, and enhancement of native plant and animal habitats throughout the park
- Protection and improvement of water and soil resources;
- Public awareness regarding the diverse natural resources in the area;
- Sustainable practices related to park development, operations and maintenance.

General natural resources management strategies include identifying and assessing remnant plant and animal communities, monitoring rare species, controlling invasive species, ecologically restoring native plant and animal habitat, controlling detrimental insects and disease, wildlife management, enhancing water quality, erosion control and cooperative land stewardship.

A review of the Natural Heritage Information System (NHIS) revealed that there are known occurrences of rare features near the park, including:

- The Black Sandshell (*Ligumia recta*), a state-listed special concern mussel, has been documented in the Mississippi River near the park.
- Blanding's turtles (*Emydoidea blandingii*), a state-listed threatened species, have been reported within a one-mile search radius of the park and could very well be encountered on site.

The area is an important migratory stop for waterfowl, waterbirds, raptors and neotropical migrants and as such is designated as part of the North Metro Mississippi River Important Bird Area. In the past, Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) and colonial waterbirds have been known to nest on Cloquet and Foster Islands. Anoka County had a survey conducted to locate any nests near the park. The only nest found was a Bald Eagle's nest, which is currently located across the river from the park and is greater than 660 feet from any proposed disturbance. Therefore, no further action should be required to comply with the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, but prior to each phase of development, a new survey shall be conducted to verify nesting locations and ensure compliance with the Protection Act. The master plan indicates that the County is confident it can avoid disturbance to the listed species during the development of the park using recommendations and best management practices as outlined by the Department of Natural Resources and US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Review by Other Council Divisions

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

Environmental Services – Sewers (Roger Janzig 651-602-1119) – No comment.

Local Planning Assistance (Eric Wojchik 651-602-1330) – No comment.

Metro Transit (Kyle Burrows 612-349-7749) – The master plan amendment will not have a significant impact on the transit network.

Transportation/Aviation Planning (Russ Owen 651-602-1705) – No comment.

Facility Exchange:

System Protection Strategy 2 of the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan* states that lands in the Regional Parks System will only be converted to other uses if approved by the Metropolitan Council through an equally valuable land or facility exchange.

In this case, an equally valuable facility exchange has been proposed. The *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan* defines an equally valuable facility as an exchange of land for facilities when recreational benefits and/or natural resource benefits are increased as a result of the exchange.

System Protection Strategy 2 also requires that the following criteria be evaluated to determine whether Regional Parks System lands may be exchanged for other lands or a facility. Staff evaluation is shown in italic font.

Issues with respect to the existing park system unit:

- 1. Whether the park system unit can continue to meet Council site and site attribute standards established for the particular type of park system unit (regional park, park reserve, trail greenway or special recreation feature).**

The 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan requires that regional parks include a natural setting contiguous to water bodies or water courses where possible. Regional parks typically require 200-500 acres of land, with a minimum of 100 acres allowed if there are high quality natural resources.

The proposed removal of 5.31 acres will not impact the ability of the Mississippi West Regional Park to meet the standards for a regional park. The land being removed is located adjacent to Highway 10 and does not include high quality natural resources. The regional park will retain 268 acres, including its shoreline along the Mississippi River.

- 2. Whether Mississippi West Regional Park will continue to function as originally planned.**

A paved trail travels along the northern boundary of the regional park. The master plan that was approved by the Metropolitan Council in March 2011 called for prairie restoration for the northern area. The removal of 5.31 acres will minimally impact the prairie restoration area and the existing paved trail will remain intact. The County will mitigate unavoidable impacts to the restored prairie by restoring other non-native areas within the regional park.

- 3. Whether environmental features (wildlife habitat, water quality) of Mississippi West Regional Park will be adversely affected.**

The removal of land adjacent to Highway 10 will not negatively impact the environmental features of the regional park.

- 4. Whether the regional park benefits from a facility in exchange for the parkland.**

The land being removed from the regional park will be developed as a frontage road along Highway 10, which will allow the planned park entrance to be relocated, reducing fragmentation of the park. The appraised value of the land (\$200,000) will be invested in the entrance road, trail, and parking lot project that is scheduled to begin construction in 2017.

- 5. Whether the need for the conversion, as in the instance of transportation improvements, is generated by Mississippi West Regional Park.**

The conversion is generated by the need for a frontage road along Highway 10 for safety reasons and is not generated by the regional park.

Issues with respect to the alternate use:

- 1. The land area needs of the proposed project.**

The proposed project requires 5.31 acres of regional parkland for development of a frontage road along Highway 10.

2. Whether the specific site requirements for the proposed project are unique to the area proposed for conversion.

The site requirements for the proposed frontage road are unique in that it is not possible to locate the frontage road on the north side of Highway 10, due to existing development that is located between the highway and a railroad corridor. The project involves an extension of an existing frontage road.

3. Whether the proposed project is consistent with Council policies.

The proposed project does not conflict with Council policies.

4. Whether the proposed project is of greater benefit to the region than having the Regional Parks System unit remain in place.

The proposed project benefits the region by helping address safety issues on Highway 10 and facilitating the development of a new park entrance road. Although the project reduces the size of Mississippi West Regional Park, it will still remain in place and include 268 acres.

Attachment 1: Land to be removed from Mississippi West Regional Park

