

Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission

Meeting date: December 4, 2018

For the Community Development Committee meeting of December 17, 2018

For the Metropolitan Council meeting of January 9, 2019

Subject: Kingswood Special Recreation Feature Acquisition Master Plan Amendment and Boundary Adjustment, Three Rivers Park District, Review File No. 50032-2

District(s), Member(s): District B, Robert Moeller

Council District: 3 – Jennifer Munt

Policy/Legal Reference: Minnesota Statutes § 473.313; Planning Strategy 1, *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*

Staff Prepared/Presented: Colin Kelly, Planning Analyst (651-602-1361), and Tracey Kinney, Planner (651-602-1029), Regional Parks and Natural Resources

Division/Department: Community Development / Regional Planning

Proposed Action

That the Metropolitan Council:

1. Approve Three Rivers Park District's Kingswood Special Recreation Feature Acquisition Master Plan Amendment.
2. Approve the boundary adjustment adding 17.97 acres of high-quality, natural resource land on Little Long Lake in the City of Minnetrista.
3. Inform Three Rivers Park District that it must submit the Kingswood Special Recreation Feature Development Master Plan Amendment for Metropolitan Council approval prior to requesting funding for development.

Background

Three Rivers Park District was approached by a willing seller to purchase 17.97 acres of lakeshore property adjacent to Kingswood Special Recreation Feature in the City of Minnetrista. Purchase of this land would enhance protection of Little Long Lake, one of the most pristine water bodies in the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area and increase the size of the special recreation feature from 106 acres to 124 acres. Little Long Lake's excellent water quality allows for a two-tier fishery of pan fish and northern pike populations as well as a trout fishery, unusual this far south in Minnesota.

Upon acquisition, Three Rivers Park District will remove the only residential structure and the only non-public development on the northern portion of the lake, returning additional shoreline to a natural state. This master plan amendment request modifies the boundaries from the 2013 Council-approved acquisition master plan for the Kingswood Special Recreation Feature and reaffirms the overarching intent of Three Rivers to protect and preserve Little Long Lake and its shoreland for future generations.



Prior to any significant development of the property, Three Rivers must prepare a development master plan to more thoroughly establish a vision for the park, including a public engagement process that will help guide development and operational plans and associated costs.

As Three Rivers Park District submitted this master plan amendment prior to May 1, 2019, the Council is reviewing this amendment under master planning requirements of the 2015 version of the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*.

Rationale

This amendment to the Kingswood Special Recreation Feature Acquisition Master Plan is consistent with the requirements of the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*, including Planning Strategy 1 – Master planning, and other Council policies.

Thrive Lens Analysis

The Kingswood Special Recreation Feature Acquisition Master Plan and boundary adjustment advances the Thrive outcome of Stewardship through responsibly managing the region's finite resources including conserving quality natural resources.

Funding

The tentative acquisition cost for the 17.97-acre property is \$2.2 million, including \$2.1 million for acquisition and \$100,000 for preliminary stewardship work including appraisal, environmental assessment, closing, demolition, and site restoration. The property description for the 17.97-acre parcel is: PIN 053-1511724220004, LOT 001 BLOCK 001 "BAKER GAME FARM ADDITION"

Approval of this acquisition master plan amendment does not commit the Council to any funding at this time. The approval will allow Three Rivers Park District to request acquisition funding as described above. Future development funding will be contingent on a Council-approved development master plan.

Known Support / Opposition

Three Rivers Park District has focused engagement related to its master plan amendment process on the City of Minnetrista to ensure the amendment request is locally supported, consistent with the City's current comprehensive planning efforts, and compliant with zoning laws. To date, the Minnetrista Planning Commission (September 24, 2018), Parks Commission (October 9, 2018), City Administrator (October 15, 2018 letter), and the City Council (November 13, 2018) all support the proposed master plan amendment.

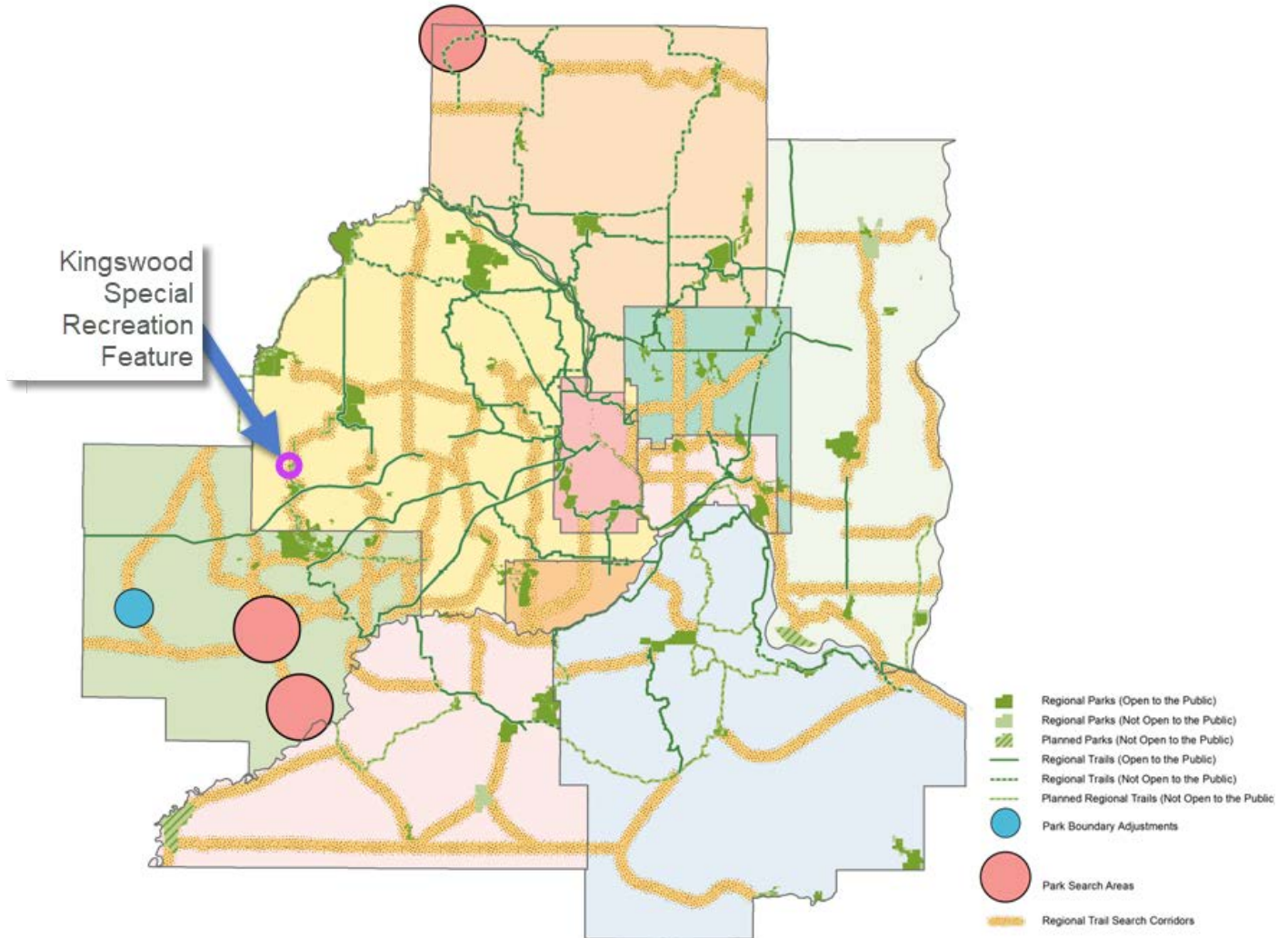
Analysis

Planning Strategy 1 of the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan* requires that master plans for regional parks, park reserves, and special recreation features address each of the 12 items listed below. As noted above, because Three Rivers Park District (Three Rivers) submitted this master plan amendment prior to May 1, 2019, the Council is reviewing this amendment under master planning requirements of the 2015 version of the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*.

Boundaries and Acquisition

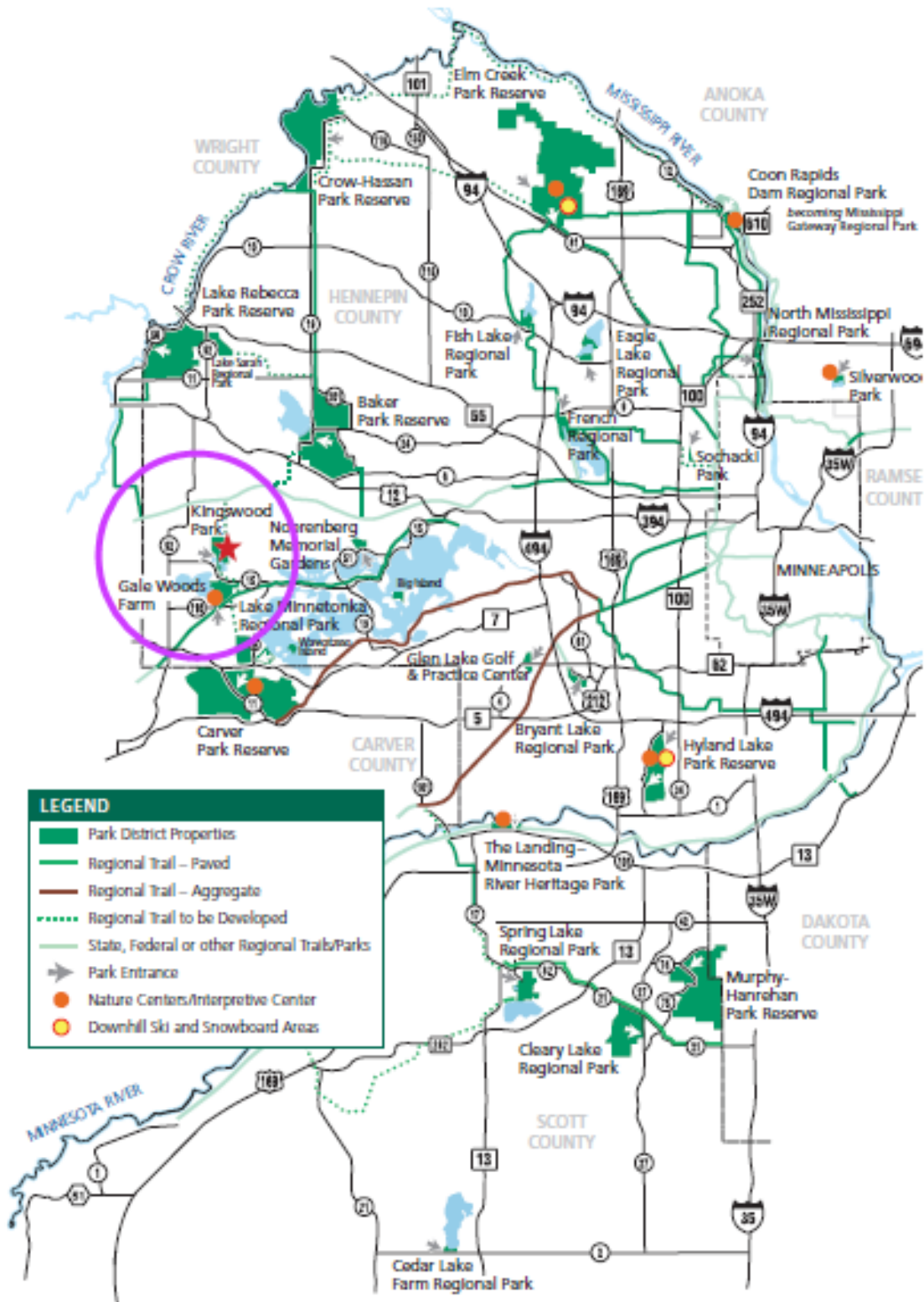
Kingswood Special Recreation Feature resides within the Three Rivers Park District System, located in western Hennepin County in the City of Minnetrista (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Location of the Kingswood Special Recreation Feature within the Regional Park System



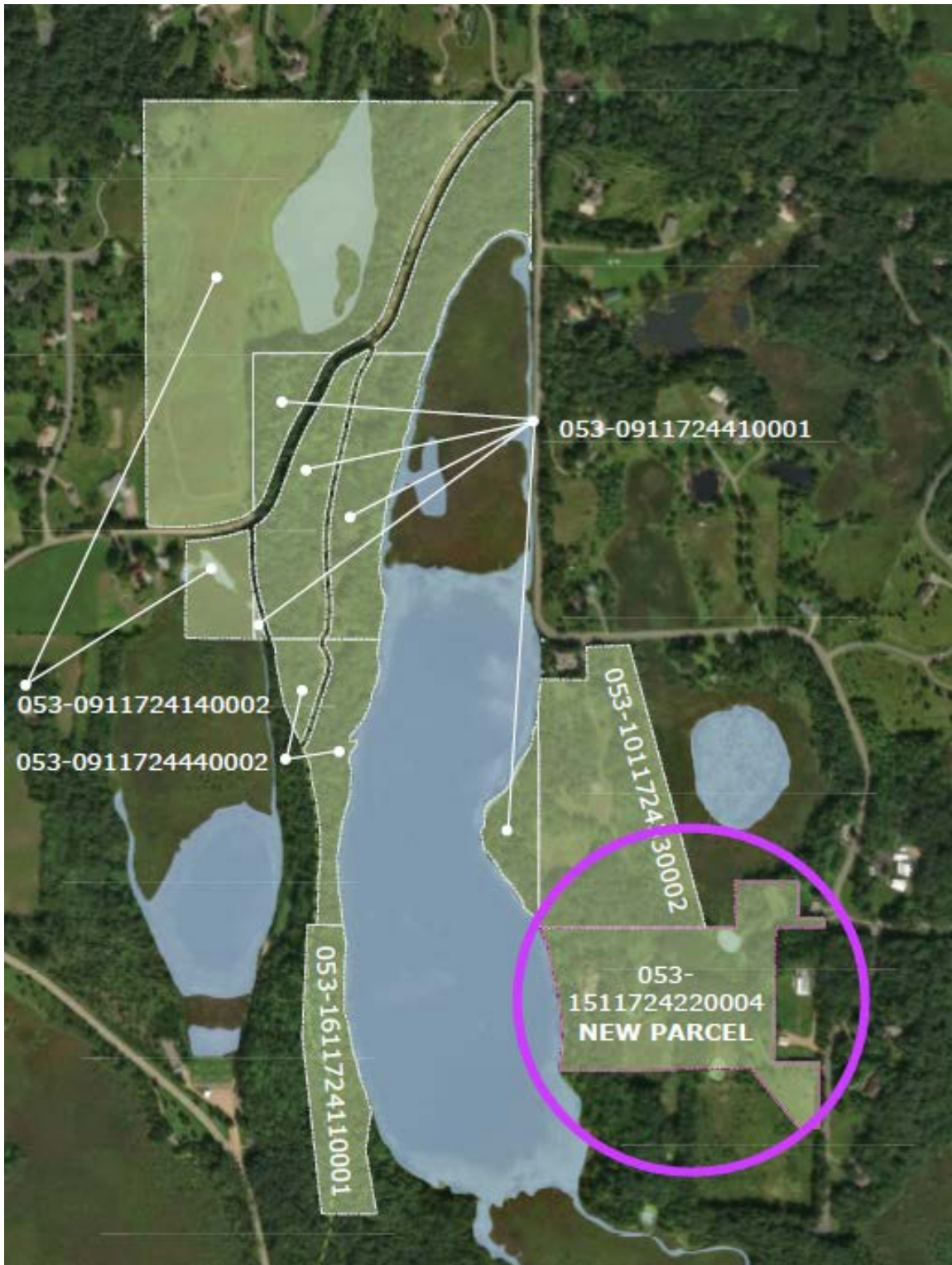
Kingswood Special Recreation Feature is north of Gale Woods Farm Special Recreation Feature in the western part of Hennepin County (Figure 2). Both special recreation features are planned to be connected by the Baker/Carver Regional Trail whose master plan the Council approved in 2015.

Figure 2: Location of the Kingswood Special Recreation Feature within the Three Rivers Park District System



The boundary for the proposed Kingswood Special Recreation Feature Acquisition Master Plan Amendment includes 106.24 acres currently owned by Three Rivers and 17.97 acres currently held by a private party, but subject to a future purchase agreement with Three Rivers. The property is located in the City of Minnetrista generally north of County Road (CR) 15, south of CR 26, east of CR 92 and west of CR 110 (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Boundaries and Acquisition Location



Land Use

The 17.97-acre property includes Little Long Lake shoreland, a residential home, and natural areas (Figure 4). Land north of the property is owned by Three Rivers and a private land owner. Land south and east of the property is owned by private land owners. Little Long Lake sits to the west along a steep embankment and one single-family home/property is directly to the east.

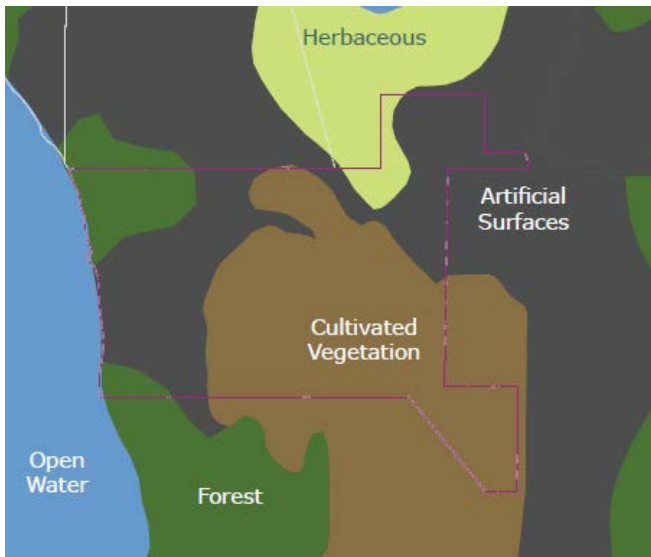
Figure 4: Land Uses



Land Cover

According to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, a significant portion of the property is classified as cultivated vegetation due to the existing red pine plantation which is not native to this area but still provides habitat and cover for many wildlife species. The artificial surfaces are predominately mowed areas (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Land Cover



The long-term natural resource plan for the property is to restore the property to vegetation characteristic of the Big Woods ecological subsection, where oak woodland and maple-basswood forest are the most common vegetation types. To facilitate this restoration, the existing red pine plantation would be harvested.

Significant Resources

Figure 6 identifies regionally significant terrestrial and wetland areas; a ranking of three – covering much of this area – is considered to have the highest natural resource significance in the state. Often areas ranked three are larger in size and surrounded by complementary land cover and uses, more ecologically diverse or may be an isolated native plant community with outstanding biodiversity significance as classified by the Minnesota County Biological Survey.

Figure 6: Natural Resource Significance



Easements

A small driveway easement may cross the northeast corner of the 17.97-acre property proposed for acquisition. The potential easement was historically used to provide access to the adjacent property. The easement is viewed as minor and does not prohibit Three Rivers from achieving the long-term vision for the property. The exact size, location and conditions will be further evaluated as part of standard title work and efforts to vacate the easement will be pursued if the easement is no longer needed by the holder.

Purchase of this property would protect 124-acres surrounding Little Long Lake, one of the most pristine lakes in the Twin Cities. Little Long Lake's excellent water quality allows for a two-tier fishery of pan fish and northern pike populations, as well as an unusual occurrence of a trout fishery this far south in Minnesota. Upon acquisition, the only residential structure and the only non-public development on the northern portion of the lake would be removed returning additional shoreline to a natural state. Three Rivers' over-arching intent is to protect and preserve Little Long Lake and its shoreland for future generations.

Acquisition Needs

The tentative acquisition cost for the 17.97 acres is \$2.2 million, including \$2.1 million for acquisition and \$100,000 for the preliminary stewardship work including appraisal, environmental assessment, closing, demolition and site restoration. The 17.97-acre parcel is identified as PIN 053-1511724220004, LOT 001 BLOCK 001 "BAKER GAME FARM ADDITION".

There is only one additional private property directly on the northern portion of the lake and it is undeveloped and located immediately south of the property proposed for acquisition. There are several additional properties within the northeast area of the lake that are not directly on the lake, but within the lake's watershed. If or when any of these properties are for sale, Three Rivers may consider acquiring

them and will work with the City of Minnetrista (City) for support. In addition, Three Rivers will remain open to working with the City and property owners on other ways to protect and improve the area within the watershed boundary.

Stewardship Plan

The *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan* requires that a master plan describe how park property will be managed prior to development. The stewardship plan for Kingswood focuses on restoring the developed portions of the property to a natural state, managing the native plant communities for invasive species and overall health, and providing basic public access in limited areas of the park. In the short term, Three Rivers Park District plans on demolishing the structures and driveway and restoring the site to a natural condition.

Prior to any significant development, Three Rivers will produce and seek approval of a comprehensive development master plan. The development master plan process will include significant public engagement and a thorough evaluation of recreational needs, complementing development opportunities and cost analysis.

Demand Forecast

The approach used for estimating demand is based on current use at the metro system's seven existing special recreation features (Table 1). Of those seven, Square Lake and Gale Woods Farm are the most comparable to Kingswood, with Square Lake offering similar outstanding water quality in a semi-rural area, and Gale Woods Farm offering instructor-led programs in a semi-rural area. Using this approach and if fully developed as envisioned, Kingswood should experience between 55,000 to 100,000 visits each year, not including visits associated with the planned Baker/Carver Regional Trail.

Table 1. Existing Special Recreation Features and Annual Use

| Existing Special Recreation Feature | Focus | Annual Use (2017) | Notes |
|---|----------------------|-------------------|--|
| Gale Woods Farm | Farm education | 128, 600 | - |
| Noerenberg Gardens | Gardens | 55,700 | - |
| Square Lake | Water clarity | 151,600 | - |
| The Landing | History | 16,800 | - |
| Silverwood | Environment and arts | 397,100 | |
| Como Park Zoo | Zoo | 5,367,400* | Use estimate includes Regional Park, Zoo, and Conservatory |
| Marjorie McNeely Conservatory at Como Regional Park | Gardens | 5,367,400* | Use estimate includes Regional, Zoo, and Conservatory |

From a recreation perspective, Three Rivers Park District’s acquisition of the property and removal of the only home on this portion of the lake supports and improves how passive water recreationalists already use and enjoy the lake: non-motorized or restricted motor boating (e.g., kayaking, canoeing and paddle boarding), swimming, fishing and tubing. In addition, removing the home positioned above the eastern shoreline will improve the quality of visitor experience on the lake and create an “up north” experience within a 30-minute drive from Minneapolis.

Development Concept

Generally, the development concept of Kingswood Special Recreation Feature may be divided into two phases. Phase One focuses on stewardship in the near-term. Phase Two focuses on regional trail development over a longer term.

Phase One

Three Rivers Park District may develop portions of the special recreation feature in accordance with existing conservation easements and a future development master plan upon approval by the Council. The areas of the park where the majority of a former camp existed will remain closed to public access while restoration efforts take hold.

Three Rivers’ interim use includes a new gravel parking lot on Kingswood Road that serves a short trail through the restored prairie and an adjacent maple-basswood forest and picnic shelter. Depending on future demand for and condition of the picnic shelter, it may be rehabilitated, replaced, or removed and replaced with a small viewing area over Kingswood Pond. In any event, improved Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) access to this site is envisioned as part of the interim use of the property.

Three Rivers may also consider other non-paved trail use within specified areas of Kingswood and within the constraints of existing conservation easements.

Three Rivers intends to initiate nature-based service learning opportunities and nature-based recreation programs as part of the interim phase. Examples of service learning opportunities may include sustainable trail development and maintenance, and invasive species control.

Upon completion of the interim phase, the west side of the property will be open to low-impact trail use and the east side of the property will remain closed to the public except during staff-led programs and

events, which may occur on a limited basis. Development will improve access to this area during this phase and is estimated to cost \$150,000.

Upon acquisition of the 17.97-acre property, steps will be taken to remove the residential structure, garden shed, utilities and driveway, and restore the property to a natural state (estimated at \$100,000; included as part of the acquisition cost).

Phase Two

In addition, the Baker/Carver Regional Trail is planned through the west side of the special recreation feature, linking Baker Park Reserve, the Luce Line regional and state trail, Dakota Rail Regional Trail, Lake Minnetonka Regional Park, Carver Park Reserve and the Lake Minnetonka LRT Regional Trail through the cities of Medina, Independence and Minnetrista.

The regional trail corridor through the park follows an existing cartway that runs north-south on the western edge of the property along the top of the esker ridge. Use of the cartway minimizes impacts on the existing natural resources.

Wayfinding

Kingswood Special Recreation Feature has wayfinding information located adjacent to the small lot on Kingswood Drive and along existing trails. Additional wayfinding measures are anticipated to be incorporated at key park locations and trail intersections.

Conflicts

There are no known conflicts regarding the acquisition of the 17.97-acre property. The City of Minnetrista's (City) 2030 Future Land Use and MUSA Staging Map guides the Kingswood Special Recreation Feature as Rural. The Rural land use classification allows parks and recreational trails and paths as permitted uses. Similarly, the City's most recent Zoning Map designates the property as Agriculture which also allows the property to be used for parks and recreational trails and paths. Therefore, no conflict exists between the City's long-term plans and Three Rivers' plans to preserve the property as a special recreation feature.

Public Services

No public services are needed as part of the acquisition master plan preliminary recreation development concept. If public services are needed as part of future recreation development plans, they will be addressed and coordinated as part of a development master plan and with the appropriate providers.

Utilities

Municipal sewer and water services are currently available to the proposed property acquisition, but Phase One of the long-term vision for stewardship and development recommends utilities be removed.

Policing

Upon acquisition of the 17.97-acre parcel, Three Rivers Park District Department of Public Safety will extend its patrol of the Kingswood Special Recreation Feature to this addition.

911 First Responder system currently handles calls made from the special recreation feature.

Operations

Kingswood Special Recreation Feature will be operated under Three Rivers' ordinances and policies. Kingswood will be overseen by professional public safety operations and maintenance staff. Services and maintenance staffing levels will increase or decrease as-needed and as funding permits through the employment of seasonal staff. Park Police Officers and volunteer trail patrol members will provide public safety services.

Public Engagement and Participation

Three Rivers Park District established a planning process that involved affected agencies and the general public during the development of the acquisition master plan.

Prior to any significant development of the property, Three Rivers will prepare a development master plan to more thoroughly evaluate the park's intent, development and operation plans and associated costs. The development master plan process will include a public engagement process.

Public Awareness

Three Rivers Park District manages a centralized marketing communications function that oversees Three Rivers' website, public relations, marketing, media relations, social media, brand management, event planning and promotion. A number of effective marketing and outreach tools are used to promote Three Rivers Park District, including events calendars, maps, digital and social media, direct mail, press releases, a centralized reservation system, brochures, advertising and on-site promotion. Promotional pieces often highlight how to get to the park via foot, bike, transit and car.

Three Rivers collaborates with a wide array of community, business and government organizations to promote its facilities, programs and services, and to educate the public about its resources. Three Rivers also works with the Council, the State Office of Tourism and other partners to leverage shared opportunities for creating awareness and visibility. Additionally, a focus is placed on developing partnerships and programming opportunities that allow Three Rivers to better serve all residents of suburban Hennepin County, especially those with less access to its facilities and programs.

Accessibility

Three Rivers Park District is committed to providing access and recreational opportunities to all people, including people of all races, ethnicities, incomes, and abilities. Three Rivers meets this commitment through appropriate facility design and programming considerations, and by actively addressing potential barriers to participation. All facilities described in the master plan will be developed in accordance with ADA standards and guidelines.

Three Rivers has several programs designed to assist in obtaining access for persons for whom cost could be a barrier to participation. The "Parks for All People" program is designed to provide free passes for swimming and cross-country skiing to qualified recipients of Hennepin County economic assistance programs. Discounted camping, equipment rental and educational programs are available. Three Rivers does not charge entrance fees to its regional parks, park reserves, special recreation features or regional trails.

Three Rivers pursues promotional outreach activities and works with special-interest organizations such as the Courage Center and Wilderness Inquiry to further encourage participation in activities and use of park facilities. If arrangements are made in advance, interpreters and alternative forms of printed material are available at programmed events.

Natural Resources

Three Rivers Park District has a district-wide ecological stewardship and natural resource management program focusing on natural resource preservation and restoration. Each park and trail undergo a natural resource assessment and has a specific preservation and restoration plan to meet existing conditions and Three Rivers goals.

Vegetation

The Kingswood Special Recreation Feature and surrounding watershed contain a unique assemblage of plant communities and a surprising diversity of wildlife for such a small area.

The pre-European settlement vegetation (pre-1800s) of the Kingswood property was characterized by Big Woods, defined scientifically as a mixed deciduous hardwood forest composed primarily of oak, maple, basswood, and hickory trees. Much of Minnesota's Big Woods landscape was cleared to encourage farming and drive the lumber industry. By the 1930s, farmers had converted most of the Big Woods to cropland leaving a patchwork of widely scattered wood lots. Today, less than two percent of the Big Woods remain within the Minnesota landscape.

The Kingswood property includes a sizable patch of Big Woods, extending south along the west side of Little Long Lake. This patch of Big Woods is contiguous with an adjacent native vegetation complex to the south and southeast that includes tamarack swamp and cattail sedge marsh.

The emergent vegetation surrounding the Little Long Lake is one of the most species-diverse emergent communities found in Hennepin County. While hybrid cattail is present, it is not monotypic as it is elsewhere. Sedges and wetland wild flowers are common amongst the cattails. Wild rice grows on the lake margins when water levels are high. The diversity of plant species attracts a number of songbirds in summer and seed-eating birds in fall.

The northwest corner of the property has been undergoing prairie restoration efforts. The vegetation composition of the prairie is a mix of both exotic species and native grasses and forbs.

Water Resources

Little Long Lake is approximately 65 acres in surface area and has a maximum depth of 76 feet at the southern end of the lake. Little Long Lake is one of the few lakes in Hennepin County that is not on the Impaired Waters list and provides unique recreational opportunities for swimming, scuba diving, snorkeling, kayaking, paddle boarding, rafting, boating (ten horsepower limit) and fishing.

The lake has long been recognized as an environmental gem due to its superb water quality and possesses an average summer water clarity exceeding four meters. Summer phosphorus concentrations are between 10 and 15 micrograms per liter (ug/l), which is significantly better than any other lake within the Three Rivers system. Further, Little Long Lake's depth, small surface watershed (approximately 150 acres), location at the top of a major watershed divide, and relative lack of watershed land area that could support intensive agricultural operations or urban/suburban development, means that the prospects for sustaining outstanding water quality in the lake are excellent.

Wildlife

Little Long Lake and the surrounding wetlands, woodlands and open fields provide diverse, high-quality habitat for wildlife. Consequently, many species of wildlife that are rare or uncommon in Hennepin County are found on the lake or the surrounding uplands.

Because of its excellent water quality, Little Long Lake is one of the few in the Twin Cities area capable of supporting a two-tier fishery. This means the near-surface volume of the lake supports a typical warm water bass/panfish/northern pike fish community, while the deeper waters of the lake are both cold and well-oxygenated enough to support trout. In fact, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources manages the lake as a 'put-and-take' trout fishery and has annually stocked rainbow trout since 1987. In addition, a select number of brown trout and brook trout have been stocked in the past.

Beavers have been present on Little Long Lake in one or two lodges for decades. They occasionally plug up the outflow for the lake (a culvert going south under County 15), which raises the water level sufficiently to allow boaters to go between the two water bodies. Otters, mink, and muskrats live in, or adjacent to, the lake. Green frogs are also abundant in this lake and are heard calling in mid-summer.

Ospreys that nest at neighboring Gale Woods Farm use the lake for fishing. Belted kingfishers, great blue herons and little green herons are all seen regularly. The kingfishers nest in the steep bank on the west side of the Kingswood property. This is noteworthy, because nesting sites for kingfishers are becoming a rarity as more and more erosion cuts are re-vegetated. Least bitterns, sora rails, Virginia rails, short-billed and long-billed sedge wrens, swamp sparrows and willow flycatchers have been heard calling from the emergent vegetation. A pair of common loons has occupied in Little Long Lake for decades. They attempt to nest almost every year, but human disturbance usually results in nest failure.

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.

Environmental Services – Sewer (Roger Janzig 651-602-1119) – There are no facilities in the vicinity of this proposed land acquisition; therefore, there is no impact.

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 (Angela Torres 651-602-1566) – No additional comments.