

Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission

Meeting date: November 7, 2019

For the Community Development Committee meeting of November 18, 2019

For the Metropolitan Council meeting of December 11, 2019

Subject: Mississippi Gorge Regional Park Master Plan, Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, Review File No. 50217-1

MPOSC District, Member: District D, Vacant

Council District, Member: District 8, Abdirahman Muse

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 the Mississippi Gorge Regional Park Master Plan.
2. Require that the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, prior to initiating any new development of the regional park, send preliminary plans to the Engineering Services Assistant Manager at the Metropolitan Council's Environmental Services Division for review in order to assess the potential impacts to the regional interceptor system.

Background

Over thousands of years, the Mississippi River's St. Anthony Falls has cut its way through limestone ledges and soft sandstone and in its wake has left the only gorge along the entire river's length. Mississippi Gorge Regional Park (MGRP) encompasses and protects this unique landscape in Minneapolis. The regional park draws both local and regional visitors due to its central location in the Twin Cities metro area and its access to the Mississippi River. Hardwood forests on steep rocky bluffs and in muddy floodplains, sandy beaches, and grassy expanses on the river's edge give the gorge a character both rugged and welcoming. The park is an integral piece of Minneapolis's historic Grand Rounds National Scenic Byway and lies within the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area, providing important water-oriented and trail recreation and places for people to gather along the river corridor.

The regional park is the result of visionary planning dating back more than 100 years, beginning with Horace Cleveland's plan for a connected system of parks and parkways called the Grand Rounds. Since that time, many other planning efforts have helped shape the natural treasure that is MGRP, including the 1982 Mississippi Gorge Regional Park Master Plan. In 1997, a concept plan for portions of the regional park was prepared, laying out strategies for keeping the park an undeveloped, semi-wild nature reserve in the middle of the city.

Much has changed since the completion of those plans, including changing demographics and evolving trends that are shaping recreation, social gathering, environmental stewardship and sustainability. Additionally, increased use of the river and

the parks, trails, and open spaces along it; concerns about sensitive landscapes and erosion impacts; the uncertainty of the future of the lock and dam system; and the need to address accessibility and safety concerns in the park warrant special attention and long-range planning of park improvements.

Rationale

The Mississippi Gorge Regional Park 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 Mississippi Gorge Regional Park Master Plan advances the Thrive outcomes of Livability – through increasing access to nature and outdoor recreation, which enhances quality of life in the region – and Stewardship – by protecting and enhancing our region’s natural resources, particularly the Mississippi River.

Funding

The estimated total cost to implement the master plan over a period of 10-20 years is \$24,215,000. This estimate is based on the existing dams remaining in place on the Mississippi River. If the dams were removed, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) estimates investing an additional \$2,100,000 to make improvements in the regional park. The total cost of both scenarios is \$26,315,000

MPRB acknowledges that the development of MGRP will require the involvement of a number of partners and that projects identified in the Master Plan are likely to be implemented with a variety of funding sources.

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 Bonding Program and the Parks and Trails Legacy Fund Program. Further Council action is required to approve the Regional Parks Bonding project list, the Parks and Trails Legacy Fund project list, and specific grants to MPRB.

Known Support / Opposition

At its meeting on July 10, 2019, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board of Commissioners approved the Mississippi Gorge Regional Park Master Plan. There is no known opposition to the Master Plan.

Figure 1: Regional Parks Open to the Public (2018), Mississippi Gorge Regional Park location

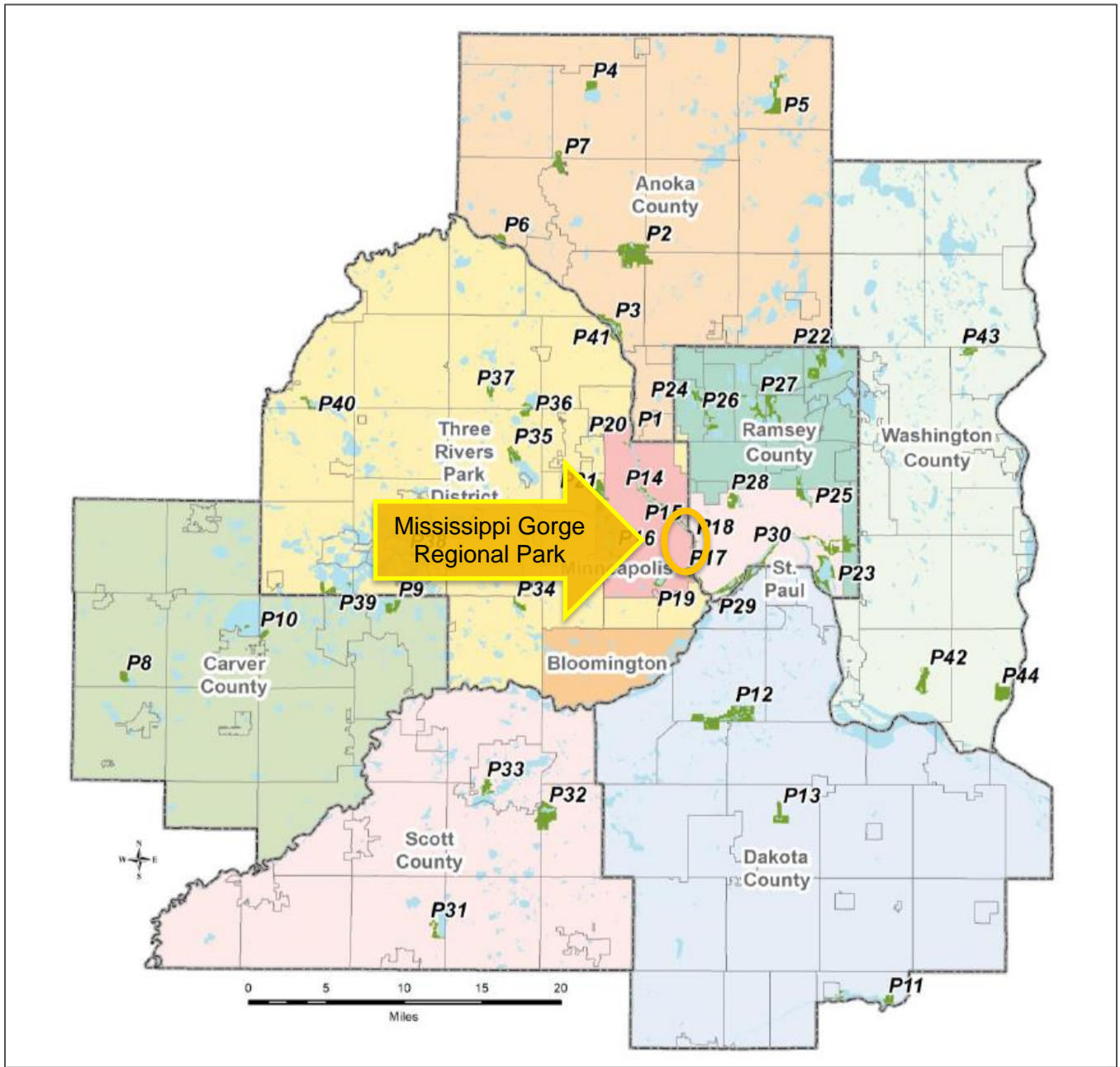
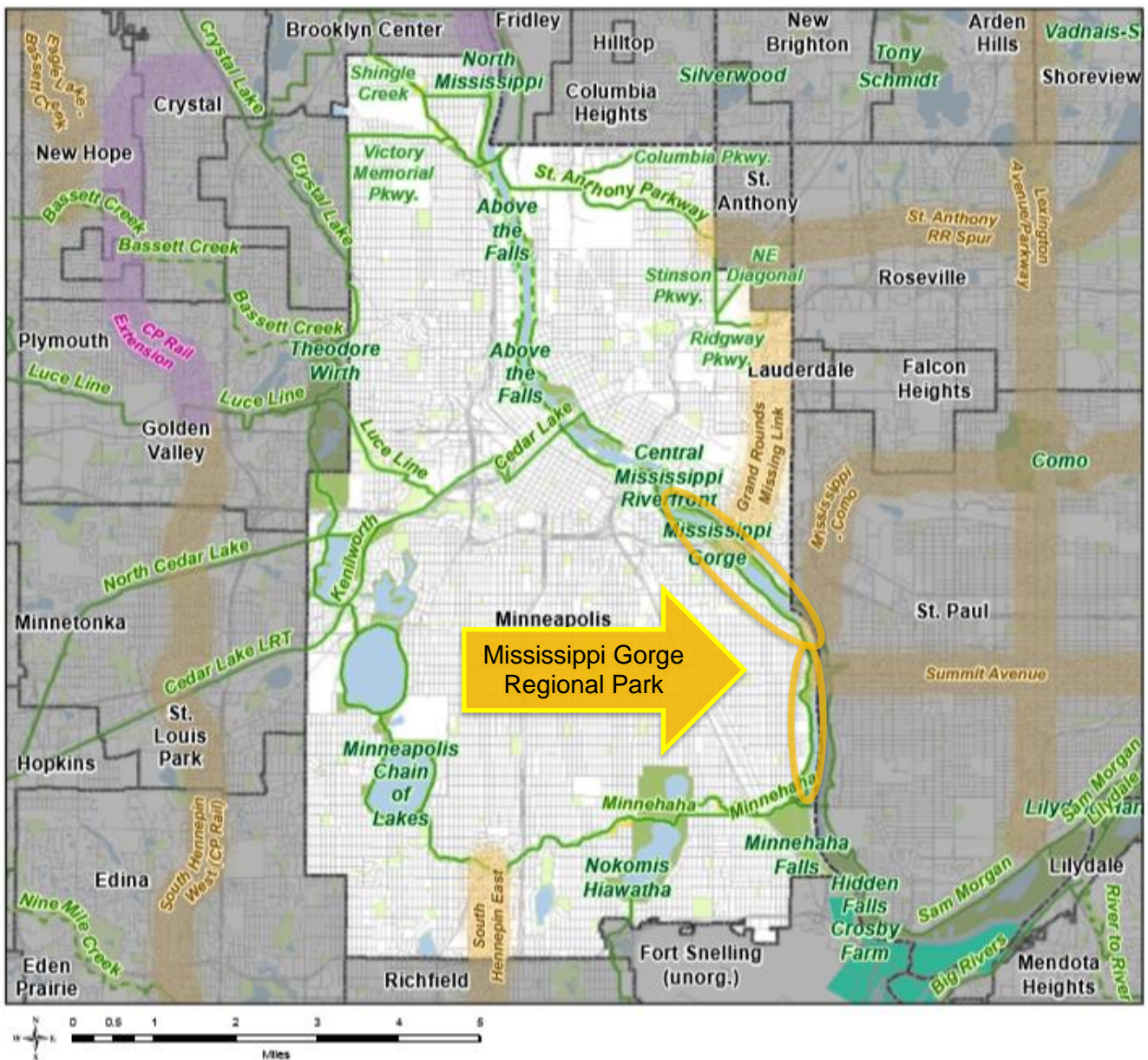


Figure 2: Regional Park System, City of Minneapolis, Hennepin County - Mississippi Gorge Regional Park location



Regional Parks

- Existing
- In Master Plan
- Planned Parks and Reserves

Regional Trails

- Existing Regional Trails
- Planned Regional Trails
- Regional Trail Corridor Land

Regional Park Search Areas and Regional Trail Search Corridors

- Boundary Adjustments
- Search Areas
- Regional Trail Search Corridors
- Regional Trails - 2040 System Additions

- Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge
- State Parks
- State Wildlife Management Areas (Publicly Accessible)
- Scientific and Natural Areas (SNA)
- Other Parks and Preserves
- Existing State Trails
- Street Centerlines (NCompass)
- Lakes and Major Rivers

Figure 3: Parks, Trails and Open Spaces (MP Fig. 2-2)



Analysis

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

The long-term vision for MGRP is to maintain the park within its current boundaries. There are no plans to acquire additional land or alter park ownership at the time of this Master Plan. There are no inholding properties.

In the event that the Lower Saint Anthony Falls Lock and Dam or Lock and Dam No. 1 are removed and river restoration is executed, there may be additional floodplain lands exposed in the current impoundment areas. At that point, in accordance with Minnesota state law, any additional land will become that of the nearest contiguous landholders, which means that MPRB should be prepared to address the management of additional floodplain landholdings.

Stewardship Plan

Protecting natural resource areas in urban settings like MGRP is an ongoing challenge. Natural areas in urban settings are impacted by human presence, which ranges from relatively low-impact activities such as hiking and birdwatching to more high-impact activities such as construction of structures, stormwater discharges, the spread of invasive species, paved trails and roads, and vegetation removal.

Given the long and ongoing history of human impacts on the gorge's ecosystem and its location within an urban core, it is impractical to restore the regional park to a "pre-European settlement" natural condition. However, there are opportunities to enhance natural resources through careful stewardship, targeted restoration activities, and public education. The recommendations included within this Master Plan support MPRB's and its partners' goals to balance the public's desire for recreation and a thriving natural ecosystem

Known cultural resources within or adjacent to MGRP include the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) listed Minnehaha Historic District, the NRHP-listed University of Minnesota Old Campus Historic District, the NRHP-listed Northrop Mall Historic District, the NRHP-eligible Grand Rounds Historic District, four NRHP-listed bridges, and two NRHP eligible bridges. There are also four recorded post-Euro-American contact archaeological sites within or adjacent to the regional park.

The stories of people who have, and continue to, live on the land where MGRP is situated are also important components of the regional park's cultural history. Stewardship of cultural resources, including those that have not yet been identified, will comply with federal and state laws regarding management of cultural resources. Stewardship of the regional park's stories will involve revealing, preserving, and expressing any "hidden" histories through interpretation.

An archaeological assessment should be completed to identify if there are any areas within or adjacent to the regional park that possess a medium- or high-potential for unrecorded intact archaeological resources. If any ground-disturbing activities are planned within an area of the MGRP that possess a medium- or high-potential for unrecorded intact archaeological resources, plans for the proposed activity will be submitted to the Office of the State Archeologist and State Historic Preservation Office for review, and an archaeological reconnaissance survey will be conducted.

Demand Forecast

According to the Metropolitan Council's Annual Use Estimate of the Regional Parks System for 2017 (July 2018), demand for regional parks and trails has continued to grow over the past decade. MGRP is unique in that most of its use is trail use. Trails have been an increasingly popular recreation element regionally and nationally, making this regional park highly desirable. Additionally, MGRP serves local

visitors as a popular vehicle and bicycle commuting route from residential neighborhoods to downtown Minneapolis. Bicycle commuting in the Twin Cities continues to increase in popularity and is expected to grow in coming years.

According to the 2017 use estimate, MGRP (estimated 1,189,000 visits) was the third most frequently visited park in the seven-county metropolitan area, after Minneapolis Chain of Lakes (estimated 7,063,500 visits) and Como (estimated 5,367,400 visits) regional parks respectively.

With additional community facilities at Bohemian Flats in the future, use of MGRP will likely increase dramatically. The potential for large events including concerts, festivals, volleyball tournaments, and rowing excursions, will bring large numbers of park users to the Flats, who may then come back to use the trails along the river.

The users of adjacent regional parks – such as Central Mississippi Riverfront (estimated 2,782,800 visits) and Minnehaha Falls (estimated 2,051,000 visits) regional parks – and existing and planned trails – such as the Midtown Greenway and Grand Rounds Missing Link – also directly impact the usership of Mississippi Gorge Regional Park.

In addition to including data from the 2017 use estimate, the Master Plan also includes a discussion of Parks and Recreation Trends and a Demographics Analysis within a broader Visitor Demand chapter. The Demographics Analysis chapter includes tables displaying “Met Council Forecasts for City of Minneapolis” and “2016 Population Estimate for a two-mile area surrounding MGRP,” which shows that over 30% of Minneapolis and Saint Paul residents live within two miles of MGRP. This table also shows that 14.9% of residents within two miles of MGRP are Black or African American; 7.4% are Hispanic or Latino; 5.7% are Asian; and 1.1% are American Indian or Alaskan Native. Further, that 19.3% of households within 2 miles of MGRP are experiencing poverty and 7.1% are households with limited English.

This and other demographic information reveal a great deal of diversity among nearby residents, suggesting a park planning process that is open and inclusionary, and park programs and facilities that address changing park user needs and desires are important considerations of the plan.

Development Concept

The Master Plan is a guide for future park improvements and capital investments within the regional park. The proposed regional park improvements strive to balance the needs of the area’s delicate natural resources and the unique river ecology with park programs and healthy recreational activity. Master planning concepts proposed in this plan build on decades of gorge-related planning by neighborhood groups, advocacy groups, watershed districts, and federal, state, and local agencies. The planning concepts reflect community values and desires, and provide specific recommendations intended to fulfill regional park goals and objectives.

Chapter 6 of the Master Plan is organized to provide information on regional park improvements and recommendations using three planning scales (i.e., overall master plan approach, focus area recommendations, and parkway and trail recommendations). For the purposes of this staff report, the focus will be on the overall master plan approach. Focus area recommendations and parkway and trail recommendations will be summarized. A copy of the full Master Plan and its appendices is available upon request.

Overall Master Plan

Park and recreation opportunities must be appropriately balanced with the protection, preservation, and restoration of the park’s natural resources and sensitive river ecology. The master plan also lives up to

and reflects the goals, identity, and partnerships created by the overlaid Mississippi National River and Recreation Area of the National Park Service.

The plan addresses park user needs and values by reflecting community input received throughout the planning process. For instance, the Community Advisory Committee and broader community made it clear that the plan must protect, preserve, and restore natural resources throughout the river gorge, including restoration efforts and removal of invasive plant species.

This master plan also proposes new park facilities and programs that address park user requests, including community gathering spaces, like the outdoor amphitheater and Welcome Center proposed at Bohemian Flats, the labyrinth/peace garden proposed at Riverside Park, and additional picnic facilities at East River Flats. It proposes ways to improve access and connectivity to, from, and within the park, addressing Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessible picnic areas and proposed restoration of the historic Works Progress Administration (WPA) staircase at Annie Young Meadow, and the entryways to “Southeast Flats” and “Longfellow Flats.”

The Master Plan considers two possible futures for the regional park: with and without the nearby dams. Each future offers different circumstances for the river’s character, ecology, and recreational opportunities. The United States Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) is currently weighing the costs and benefits associated with maintaining the lock and dams under a no change scenario, disposing of the properties partially, or fully disposing of the properties through their disposition process. Section 1168 of the Water Resources Development Act of 2018 requires that all Corps disposition studies consider removal of structures that no longer fulfill an authorized Federal purpose.

If dams remain in place, recreational opportunities along the riparian corridor will be sustained and improved. People will continue to enjoy hiking, cycling, bird watching, rowing and paddling, and fishing. Current recreational boating opportunities will likely remain relatively unchanged for the next decade. The Master Plan also proposes invasive species management, riparian corridor improvements, and stormwater outfall enhancement.

If the dams are removed, the Mississippi River within the gorge will look much different than it does today. More detailed studies would need to be completed to accurately predict the ecological and riverine changes to the gorge, post-dam removals, but removal of the dams will have an impact on some recreation opportunities. Anticipated changes may include the elimination of rowing and river boat cruises, increased nature education opportunities, and more diverse canoe and kayak opportunities.

Focus Area Recommendations

The 5.5-mile-long MGRP consists of natural areas, parkways, paved and unpaved trail corridors, and urban park spaces. The natural areas and park spaces within the regional park provide destinations for community gathering, passive and active recreation, nature hikes, and bird watching, among other activities. Several destinations in the park were identified during the planning process as areas requiring focused planning efforts for future regional park improvements and capital investments. The focus areas (see Figure 3) include:

- Bohemian Flats Park
- Riverside Park and Annie Young Meadow
- “Longfellow Flats” and Minneapolis Rowing Club Boathouse Area
- “Oak Savanna” Area
- East River Flats Park
- “Southeast Flats” Area

Since any removal of dams within the Mississippi River corridor in the regional park is likely decades away at the earliest and extensive study would be required to determine the specific impacts of such removals, the summaries of the indicated focus areas will not include the “without dams” scenarios. Further, the recommendations included here are those that have been prioritized through community engagement efforts.

Bohemian Flats Park

Park recommendations in this area include:

- Formal picnic area/shelter with green roof
- Natural amphitheater built into slope facing the river
- Improved trail connection to the University of Minnesota’s West Bank with stairs or an ADA accessible trail up the slope
- Additional shade trees and native landscaping throughout. Use tree stands to shape park spaces

Riverside Park and Annie Young Meadow

Park recommendations in this area include:

- Pollinator planting with picnic opportunity
- Two full-size basketball courts
- Renovated existing restroom building
- Mid-level terrace nature play/picnic area in glen area between Riverside Park and Annie Young Meadow – intensive invasive species removal
- Restored historic staircase to Annie Young Meadow

“Longfellow Flats” and Minneapolis Rowing Club Boathouse Area

Park recommendations in this area include:

- Enhanced stormwater outfall below 33rd Street – improving water quality and wildlife habitat
- Signage/wayfinding, interpretation, bike racks, and trash receptacle at top of stairs
- Repaired/renovated existing stairway

“Oak Savanna” Area

Park recommendations in this area include:

- Improved and added interpretive and signage elements at the savanna and remnant prairie’s edges – including environmental, cultural history, and interpretation related to birds in the area
- Stormwater outfall improvements to enhance water quality and wildlife habitat
- Landscape Restoration: repair and restore eroded slopes
- Preserve and protect remnant prairie and restore disturbed prairie to improve quality of natural area and habitat/wildlife value
- Closure of unintended natural surface trail segments and restoration of landscape

East River Flats Park

Park recommendations in this area include:

- Formalized park entry connecting the University of Minnesota Campus and Coffman Memorial Union to East River Flats Park
- Open event lawn/flexible open space
- Restroom building – existing, reopen
- Climbing wall

- Wayfinding signage to “Southeast Flats”

“Southeast Flats” Park

Park recommendations in this area include:

- Boardwalk on seasonally flooded areas of trail
- Improved stormwater outfall locations and enhanced ecological habitat
- Wayfinding and entry signage
- Directional/trail signage
- Possible connection of natural surface trails to the St. Paul trail system

Parkway and Trail Recommendations

Parkways make up much of the park land that park users know and experience within MGRP. They are located within regional park boundaries and provide conduits for the movement of automobiles, pedestrians, bicyclists, Rollerbladers, and roller skiers, among others. They also provide immediate access to and from the regional park from surrounding neighborhoods. They are generally characterized by linear, tree lined roadways, green medians, and paved shared-use trails that are dotted with site amenities, such as informational kiosks, river overlooks, seating, parking, and other site features. While parkways are a significant component of MGRP, this staff report focuses less on roadways and medians and more on trails, signage and site amenities.

One of the goals of the Master Plan is to create an interconnected system of safe and convenient paths and walks between parks, natural areas, and recreation facilities and connect them with residential areas, civic institutions, businesses, and other community destinations along the corridor.

Community outreach and engagement conducted by MPRB identified trails as one of the most heavily used resources in the park and a high priority. Enhancing the park’s trail system and associated trail amenities are key objectives of the park Master Plan. However, careful consideration must be given to balancing human access to sensitive landscapes with protecting and preserving quality wildlife and plant habitat. A selection of the trail-related recommendations includes:

- Create a series of various length trail loops that connect both sides of the river, utilizing existing bridges and connecting to the St. Paul trail system.
- Support the extension of the Midtown Greenway across the river.
- Design trails and sidewalks to meet or exceed ADA accessibility standards, where feasible.
- Evaluate opportunities to improve natural surface trails throughout the park. Close unsustainable trails and unintended trails and restore the landscapes appropriately.
- Install boardwalks where trails are forced to cross wet areas or where indicated in the master plan.
- Design and install wayfinding signage that will help make trails more accessible and easier to navigate.

Signage and wayfinding are an integral part of the park. They help visitors orient themselves, provide simple routes to destinations, and give the park a unique identity. Site amenities consist of features that help make the park more enjoyable to be within, and easier to use, such as benches, waste and recycling receptacles, lighting, fencing, retaining walls, bike racks, restrooms, picnic areas, drinking fountains, etc. A selection of the site amenity-related recommendations includes:

- Wayfinding signs should provide clear routes to major destinations within the park.
- Benches should be located at regular intervals along the park’s length and at trailheads, high activity areas, rest areas, and beaches.

- Bicycle racks should be located at all rest stops, trailheads, picnic areas, and major trail intersections.
- Restrooms should be placed at regular intervals along the length of the park, at rest stops, trail heads, and parking areas.
- Drinking fountains should be placed near high activity areas and trailheads.

Conflicts

MGRP exists within the context of Minneapolis and nearby Saint Paul neighborhoods with a mix of different land uses. The regional park boundary was developed over time as urban development was occurring during the late 1800s and early 1900s, and as land became available for park use throughout the 20th Century. Care has been taken in park development to ensure separation between park uses and private property through either physical space or natural landscape features, such as steep bluffs and bedrock outcroppings. Land use conflicts within the regional park arise primarily from safety issues related to vehicle traffic and roadway crossings along East and West River Parkways and park visitors that use trails differently from their intended purpose (such as mountain biking on narrow pedestrian only trails). These conflicts can be mitigated through proposed improvements at identified crossings, increased signage, and public awareness of park stewardship, and natural surface trail improvements in the Master Plan.

Public Services

Most of the recommendations within the Master Plan can be developed without extensive investment in non-recreational public infrastructure, services, and utilities. Within its fully developed urban context, there are sufficient electricity, gas, water, and sewer services to implement most of the park's improvements. Implementation of new park facilities proposed at Bohemian Flats Park, however, will require updating of public utilities (such as power and sanitary sewer service) serving the park due to proposed uses.

Additionally, coordination with the City of Minneapolis and Hennepin County will be ongoing to address transportation infrastructure needs for intersection and crossing improvements, and other vehicular circulation improvements identified in the Master Plan.

Stormwater improvements are largely anticipated to occur as components of redevelopment projects, such as improved/enhanced stormwater outfalls or the addition of new raingardens or native landscapes. These projects will be implemented by the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board in partnership with other organizations, such as the Mississippi Watershed Management Organization and the City of Minneapolis. Stormwater management is essential to continued water quality improvements in the Mississippi River.

Operations

MPRB has adopted a set of ordinances which define the rules and regulations for Minneapolis Parks in order to provide for the safe and peaceful use of the parks and corresponding facilities; for the educational and recreational benefits and enjoyment of the public; for the protection and preservation of the property, facilities and natural resources; and for the safety and general welfare of the public. A copy of the ordinances may be obtained from the MPRB. Rules and regulations are also posted throughout Minneapolis Parks properties and facilities.

Posted information includes park hours, permitted and prohibited activities, fees, maps of parks and trails, and whom to contact in the case of an emergency. MPRB Park Police Officers and Park Patrol Agents, along with City of Minneapolis police, regularly patrol all property and trails on foot, bicycle, and by motor vehicle. When necessary, ordinances may be enforced via citations.

MPRB issues construction permits for any construction on its property or use of its property for construction on nearby properties. The City of Minneapolis handles building permits and zoning where development is proposed on the park property. Any development in the regional park that may impact stormwater runoff and water quality triggers the Mississippi Watershed Management Organization to use its permitting authority as well.

Public Engagement and Participation

A successful master plan for the park is dependent on broad and meaningful participation from community members and park users. Over the course of the master planning process, MPRB and the MGRP project team met with hundreds of community members by hosting listening sessions, participating in festivals, tabling at farmers markets and other special events, organizing open house events, and administering online surveys.

MPRB and the MGRP project team worked alongside the Community Advisory Committee (CAC), Project Advisory Committee (PAC), and the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) to encompass a broad perspective of ideas, input and expertise. Additional information on the listening sessions and CAC are below. Basic summary information on the TAC is provided in the Partner Engagement section.

Listening Sessions

Meeting people in the community is the most effective and meaningful way to reach underrepresented voices. The primary method for connecting with community members and allowing stories to be shared was through listening sessions.

The listening sessions were focused around meeting with community groups, cultural groups, and other key stakeholders in spaces close to them, and at times of the week most convenient for them. The input from the listening sessions gave specific insights to the cultural ideas and basic needs of the communities living near the Gorge. The participant groups and listening session locations are listed below:

- American Indian Community at the Minnesota Chippewa Tribal Office
- K-5 Somali students at Brian Coyle Center
- Somali American Community at Brian Coyle Center
- American Indian Community at the Minneapolis American Indian Center
- Riverside Community members at the Riverside Davanni's Pizza
- University of Minnesota Students at the University of Minnesota Coffman Memorial Union

Community Advisory Committee

The 21-member CAC was convened in an effort to capture the broad community input. The committee is comprised of community members appointed by MPRB Commissioners, City Council members, representatives from the University of Minnesota and neighborhood associations/councils, and MPRB Planning staff.

The CAC met a total of eight times over the course of the master planning process and discussed an array of topics and ideas through presentations, workshops, and small group discussions. The CAC meetings were facilitated by MPRB staff and the MGRP project team. CAC meetings were generally well attended with at least half and in most cases more than three-quarters of the members attending the meetings. Members of the general public were present at each CAC meeting, and each meeting allowed for public comments.

Partner Engagement

Partner engagement primarily took the form of engaging with a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC). The TAC was made up of representatives from the Mississippi Watershed Management Organization,

Minnehaha Creek Watershed District, American Rivers, the State of Minnesota (Department of Natural Resources, State Historic Preservation Office, and Minnesota Historical Society), Metropolitan Council, City of Minneapolis, Hennepin County, City of St. Paul, the National Park Service, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and community partners and subject matter experts. The TAC met twice and provided subject matter expertise on the discussions and decisions made by the CAC and PAC.

Public Awareness

Public awareness of MGRP will begin by formally naming the park, per the recommendation from the CAC. Awareness will further be implemented by designing and constructing new park entry signs and placing them at park gateways identified in the Master Plan.

The urban context of MGRP will help in making the public aware of park improvements as they progress. As with other parks and facilities throughout its system, MPRB will publicize and promote the MGRP through a variety of established channels, including its website, publications, community newspapers, and other media. Grand openings, press releases, and integration of parks with school, recreational, and nature-based programs will also expand awareness. Within MGRP, parks, facilities, and trails will be signed, and existing MPRB system maps and wayfinding signage will be updated as progress is made with new park improvements throughout the park.

Accessibility

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board is committed to ensuring that parks and park facilities are accessible to all park users. To achieve this goal, the 2007-2020 Comprehensive Plan identifies the following strategies specifically related to accessibility and special needs populations:

- Build or rehabilitate facilities to meet or exceed standards for accessibility
- Ensure recreation opportunities are available for persons with disabilities
- Identify and reduce physical and financial barriers to participation in programming

Implementation of new park elements within MGRP will be done to meet requirements of ADA as well as principles for universal accessibility to the greatest degree possible. The nature of the MGRP site conditions (steep slopes and nature areas) and related facilities, such as natural surface trails and staircases, pose some challenges to providing accessibility throughout the park. However, where feasible, existing facilities that do not meet ADA requirements will be rehabilitated to meet ADA standards as resources allow. The United States Access Board's section 1019 of the standards for Outdoor Developed Areas provides for exceptions to accessibility standards for trails where compliance is not practicable due to terrain and/or where compliance would fundamentally alter the function or purpose of the facility or the setting. On outdoor recreation access routes, trails, and beach access routes, the exceptions apply only on the portion of the route where the condition applies.

Cost can also be a barrier for park and recreation use. Most park facilities will not require a fee for public use, as is consistent with MPRB policy throughout the park system. Amenities such as park trails, community gathering places, and public water access points are provided free of charge. Some existing and proposed park amenities at MGRP may require minimal associated user fees, for example, boat storage, rental fees for large gathering spaces or picnic pavilions, and rides on the zipline.

Natural Resources

The Mississippi gorge is a unique ecological feature, and supports an abundance of wildlife and natural amenities. The two primary features of the gorge are the Mississippi River, an aquatic resource, and the adjacent wooded bluffs, which provide a complimentary terrestrial component. The upper Mississippi River contains an abundance of fish species, although the number has been reduced with the construction of locks and dams, and the inundation of the historic rapids. Native freshwater mussels

are present, including several threatened and endangered species that occur within this reach of the river. Wetlands are also present in some fringe areas, but are generally restricted to river margins and shallow backwater areas.

The most obvious plant communities are the wooded slopes and flats representing Mesic Forest, Dry-Mesic Forest/ Woodland, Flood Plain Forest, and Altered Forest/Woodland vegetation. The steep slopes contain a mixed oak forest, which was historically more open and had areas of savanna when natural fires controlled the growth of shrubs and understory vegetation.

Wildlife are abundant within the gorge, and include a prevalence of species that have adapted to thrive in proximity to people within an urban setting. Most noticeable are the larger mammals such as white-tailed deer, but also predators such as coyote and red fox, and prey such as cottontail rabbits, grey squirrel, skunk, and woodchuck.

While wildlife is thriving within the gorge, one of the most unique attributes is the use of the corridor during fall and spring bird migration. The Mississippi River flyway is a critical migratory corridor for approximately 180 migratory bird species, including 40% of North America's waterfowl, which use the river as a natural navigation tool. Park visitors can also spot golden-winged warbler, indigo bunting, and bald eagles, as well as urban birds that require forested habitat such as blue jays, chickadees, cardinals, wood ducks, and woodpeckers.

A more detailed natural areas assessment and management planning process has been underway coincident with the development of the MGRP Master Plan. When completed in 2019, the Natural Areas Management Plan Phase 2 will provide ecologically based assessments and management recommendations for MPRB natural areas including MGRP.

Review by Other Council Divisions

Community Development – Environment and Surface Water Management (Jim Larsen 651-602-1159) As the regional park and associated roadways are adjacent to 5.5 miles of Mississippi Riverbank, it would seem to be prudent to require all new road and median curbing to be surmountable to small wildlife that we would expect to traverse the regional park. Council staff recommends that the MPRB consider revising their future road and median specifications to utilize surmountable curbing (MNDOT Curb and Gutter Design No. S524, or similar) for all proposed project roadway medians and curbing.

Environmental – Sewer (Roger Janzig 651-602-1119) – The Regional Park Master Plan reflects proposed projects that may have an impact on multiple Metropolitan Council Interceptors in multiple locations. To assess the potential impacts to our interceptor system, prior to initiating any proposed project, preliminary plans should be sent to Tim Wedin, Engineering Services Assistant Manager (651-602-4571) at the Metropolitan Council Environmental Services for review and comment.

Transportation Planning (Steve Elmer 651-602-1756) – In general, the Master Plan would benefit by including more descriptive text and a few new maps that explain the relationship of the regional park and trails network to the regional transportation system. First, it would be advantageous to incorporate language and map elements that describe and reference the Regional Bicycle Transportation Network (RBTN). This could be done by adding a new map to highlight the RBTN elements listed below, or by incorporating these elements into Figure 2.2 and/or Figure 2.3. Second, Council staff suggest highlighting regional transitway connections via the Blue and Green light rail transit lines and the arterial bus rapid transit A Line in Figure 2-4. Third, including wayfinding signs at transit nodes (e.g., Blue and

Green line stations and the A-Line) and other destinations (e.g., TCF Bank Stadium, Minnehaha Regional Park, Saint Paul) would greatly enhance the trail system.

Local Planning Assistance – Land Use (Michael Larson 651-602-1407) – The Master Plan is consistent with, and implements, the Natural Resources Protection Policy in *Thrive MSP 2040 (Thrive)*. The Master Plan clearly and comprehensively identifies opportunities to conserve, restore, and protect the various natural resources elements within the park, particularly in the Master Plan section related to ecological/natural resources. Investments are itemized in the Master Plan’s Implementation chapter. The Plan also addresses the policy on Water Sustainability, as it addresses stormwater management through and from the park and the potential implications of dam removal. The Master Plan also addresses accessibility to the park, transportation within/along the park, and the impact of transportation on the park. As such, it is consistent with and implements the Access, Mobility, and Transportation Choice policy in *Thrive*.