

Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission

Meeting date: December 2, 2021

For the Community Development Committee meeting of December 6, 2021

For the Metropolitan Council meeting of December 8, 2021

Subject: Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail Master Plan Amendment, Dakota County, Review File No. 50016-2

MPOSC District, Member: District H, Todd Kemery

Council District, Member: District 15, Phillip Sterner

Policy/Legal Reference: Minn. Stats. §§ 473.313; *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*: Chapter 5, Planning Strategy 1

Staff Prepared/Presented: Colin Kelly, Planning Analyst (651-602-1361); Chee Yang, Parks Planner (651-602-1360)

Division/Department: Community Development / Regional Planning

Proposed Action

That the Metropolitan Council:

1. Approve Dakota County's Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail Master Plan Amendment for the Fort Snelling State Park segment.
2. Require Dakota County to send preliminary plans to the Metropolitan Council's Environmental Services Interceptor Engineering Assistant Manager prior to initiating any new development of the regional trail corridor.

Background

The 3.7-mile Fort Snelling State Park segment of the Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail is centrally located in the Regional Parks System (Figure 1), in the northwestern portion of the City of Eagan in Dakota County (Figure 2). The majority of this segment is within Fort Snelling State Park and will connect to existing Minnesota River Greenway segments at the Nichols Trailhead at MN-77/Cedar Avenue and the trailhead at Lone Oak Road and MN-13/Sibley Memorial Highway (Figure 3).

Dakota County's Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail Master Plan was approved by the Council in 2012 (2012 Plan). Following master plan approval, Dakota County completed a series of additional studies and investigations including the 2014 Minnesota River Greenway Eagan Feasibility Study (Feasibility Study), 2017 Minnesota River Greenway Cultural Resources Interpretive Plan (Interpretive Plan), and the 2021 Environmental Assessment Worksheet (EAW).

The Council received the Minnesota River Greenway EAW from Dakota County in June 2021 (Review File No. 22570-1). The regional trail alignment depicted in the EAW was one of two recommendations referenced in the 2014 Feasibility Study. Council staff's review of the EAW determined that the alignment depicted in that document varied enough from the 2012 Plan to require a minor master plan amendment to update the Council's document of record. Further, a significant portion of the alignment is planned to travel through Fort Snelling State Park. As a result, Council staff sought documentation of the cooperative use agreement between Dakota County and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources that would allow for the future regional trail segment to travel through state property. Such

actions are meant to ensure eligibility for future funding of regional trail development, operations, and maintenance.

This plan amendment brings the recent planning and technical work conducted by Dakota County into the official record for the master plan. It is a minor, “administrative” amendment. Council staff worked closely with Dakota County staff to outline the required additional information for this action to include:

- Development concept
- Conflicts
- Operations
- Partner engagement
- Public engagement and participation
- Accessibility

These requirements were provided in a memo and master plan amendment checklist to Dakota County in July 2021 (Attachment 1).

Rationale

The Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail Master Plan Amendment is consistent with the requirements of the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*, particularly Planning Strategy 1 (Master plan requirements) and other Council policies.

Thrive Lens Analysis

The Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail Master Plan Amendment advances the Thrive outcome of Livability by increasing access to nature and outdoor recreation, which enhances quality of life in the region.

Funding

The total estimated acquisition and development costs to complete the Fort Snelling State Park segment of the Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail, is \$6,000,000.

The annual cost of operating this trail is estimated to be \$4,030/mile per year. Additionally, the County estimates the trail will require fog sealing in year 7 and year 14, with an overlay scheduled for year 20. The costs for fog sealing and asphalt work averages to approximately \$5,280 per year. The primary revenue sources for these maintenance activities are Regional Park Operation and Maintenance Funding, and Dakota County tax levy.

Known Support / Opposition

The Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail has support from various agencies. Some agencies have or will have agreements with Dakota County. Other agencies were involved in the concept development of the regional trail alignment, for which they provided comments and recommendations.

- U.S. Army Corp of Engineers
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife
- Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MN DNR)
- Board of Water and Soil Resources
- Metropolitan Council
- Gun Club Lake Watershed Management Organization (WMO)
- Lower Minnesota River Watershed District
- Dakota Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD)
- City of Eagan

- Xcel Energy
- Magellan Midstream Partners
- Union Pacific Railroad

Figure 1: Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail (Segment 2) location in the Regional Parks System

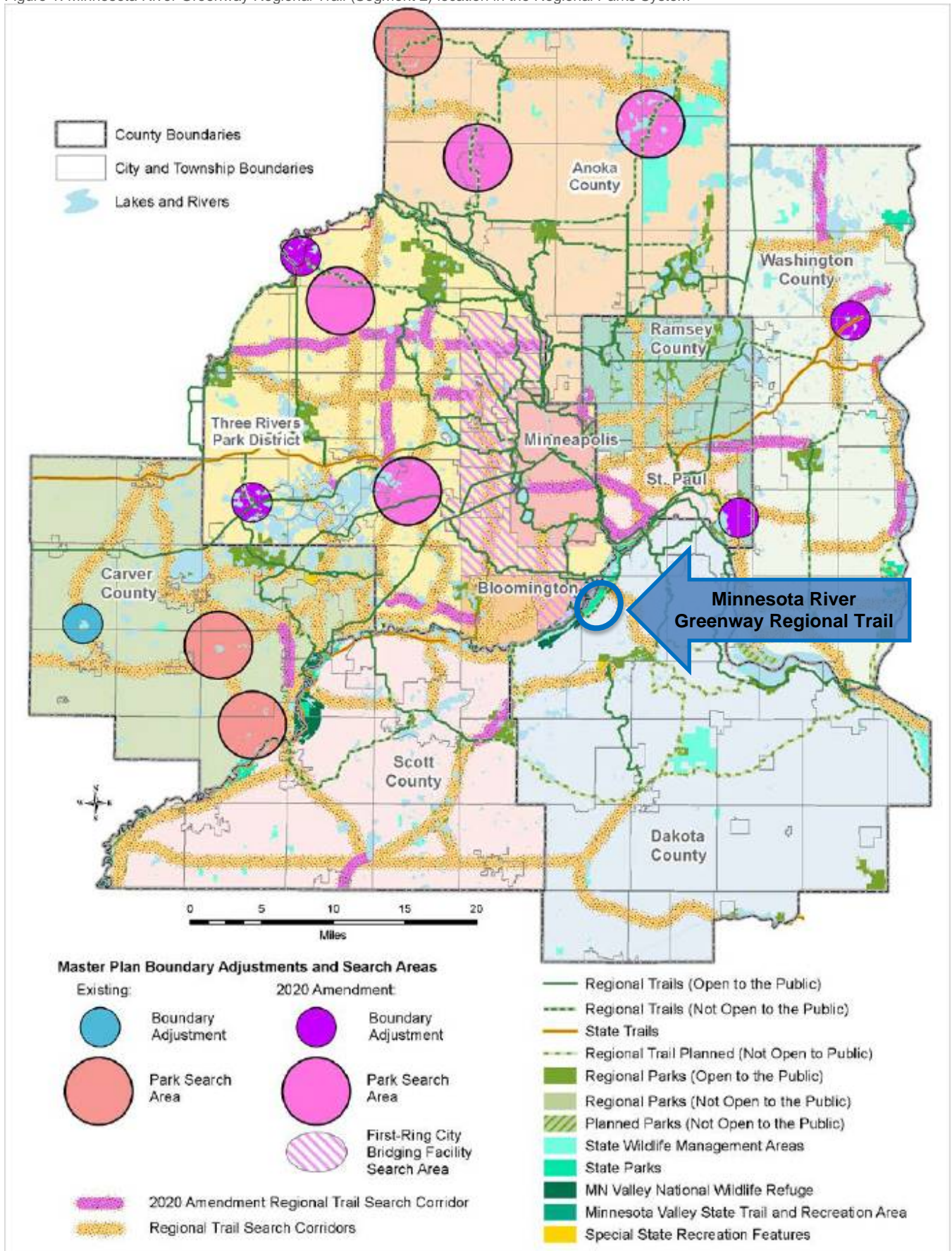
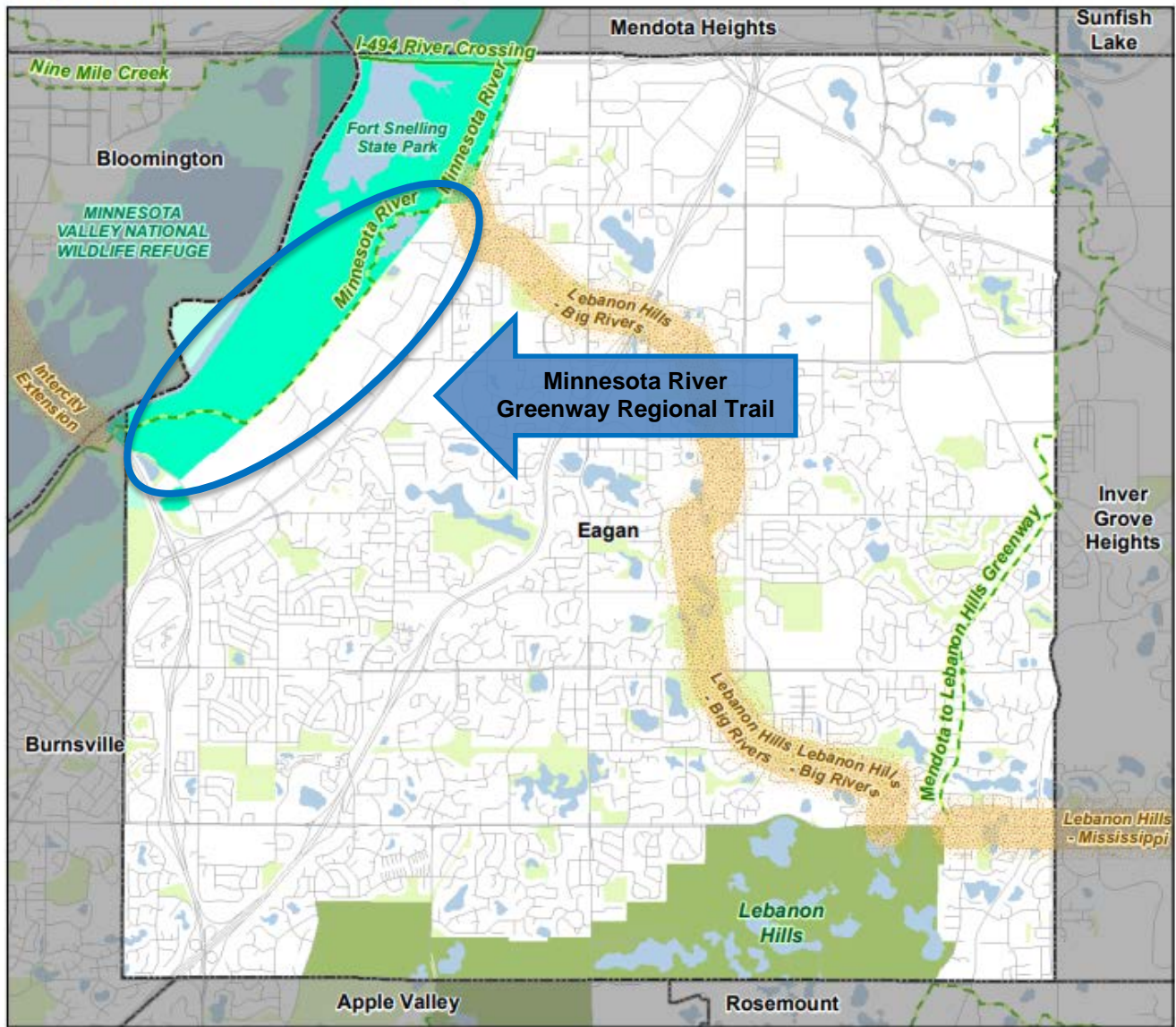


Figure 2: Regional Parks System in the City of Eagan, Dakota County – Proposed Fort Snelling State Park segment alignment

Regional Parks System City of Eagan, Dakota County



Regional Parks

- Existing
- In Master Plan
- Planned Parks and Reserves

Regional Trails

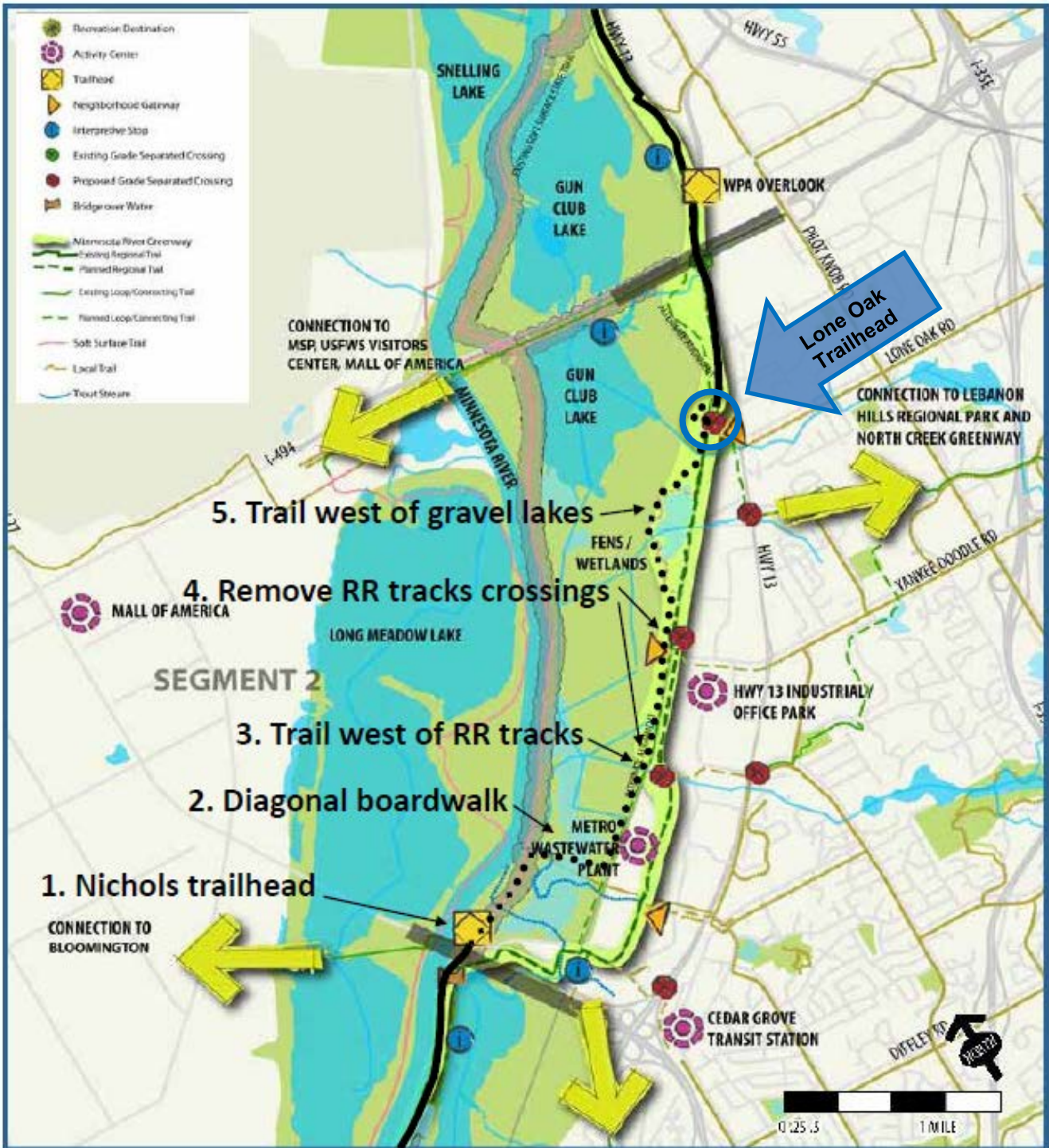
- Existing Regional Trails
- Planned Regional Trails
- Regional Trail Corridor Land

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: Minnesota River Greenway Trail (MPA Figure 2)



Completed MN River Greenway Trail
2021 EAW MN River Greenway Alignment

Analysis

As referenced in the Background, Council staff communicated required elements for this amendment with Dakota County to provide additional information on the following plan components, based on Planning Strategy 1 of the *2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan*: development concept, conflicts, operations, partner engagement, public engagement and participation, and accessibility. The following analyzes the plan amendment against those requirements.

Development Concept

The updated alignment for the Fort Snelling State Park segment of the Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail appears on Figure 3, overlain on the 2012 Plan concept map. The updated alignment connects and provides a continuous greenway trail from Burnsville to Harriet Island in St. Paul, and then south along the Mississippi River Greenway Regional Trail to Rosemount and Hastings. When complete, this segment will close an important gap between the existing Black Dog segment of the Minnesota River Greenway to the south with the Big Rivers segment to the north.

The 2012 Plan identified a preferred alignment and three alternative alignments to address the difficulty of locating a greenway trail in this segment of the corridor. The purpose of the alternative alignments in the 2012 Plan was to promote flexibility in designing a trail in this challenging location. The alternative referenced as the “Southwest portion” in the 2012 Plan most closely aligns with the updated trail alignment.

Existing conditions identified in the 2012 Plan required further study to refine and design the preferred trail alignment. Existing conditions included potential impacts on and relationship to the following in the area:

- Wetlands
- Floodplains
- Nichols Fen
- Union Pacific Railroad Property
- Industrial Land Use
- Seneca Wastewater Treatment Plant
- Police Shooting Range

Since the 2012 Plan was adopted, there have been several trail refinements and progress toward implementation. Improvements include:

- Trail improvements at Nichols Trailhead – In 2019 and 2020, Dakota County partnered with MN DNR for improvements to the boat launch and the Nichols Trailhead. A new trailhead parking area and visitor facilities were developed within the footprint of the existing parking lot under the Cedar Avenue bridge. Existing unused parking areas were restored to wetland and natural areas.
- Diagonal trail alignment – In the 2014 Feasibility Study, the Metropolitan Council’s Wastewater Treatment Plant, Nichols Fen, and the police shooting range emerged as substantial barriers for a trail route running parallel to the railroad tracks on the east side of the railroad tracks. A long, diagonal boardwalk was proposed as an environmentally sensitive design to avoid these barriers. The boardwalk is from Nichols Trailhead to the west of the railroad tracks.
- Trail on west side of railroad tracks – Landowners were identified as barriers to a trail that would be located on the east side of the railroad tracks. The 2021 EAW proposed that the trail be

located on the west side of the railroad tracks, consistent with one of the alternative alignments identified in the 2012 Plan.

- Reduced railroad crossings – The 2012 Plan identified three separate railroad crossings. During the 2017 Lone Oak segment design process, the Union Pacific Railroad expressed strong concerns regarding the at-grade railroad crossings. They prohibited all at-grade crossings and discouraged below grade crossings. This railroad policy decision significantly increased the cost of trail crossings which led to reducing the number of crossings from three to one. The design move resulted in a trail alignment entirely on the west side of the railroad tracks. The updated alignment is parallel and adjacent to railroad right-of-way (ROW), separated by approximately 60 feet at its closest point from the existing tracks.
- Trail on the west side of the gravel lakes – The 2012 Plan identified the preferred alignment for the trail on the east side of the gravel lakes between the lakes and the Union Pacific railroad tracks. The 2021 EAW determined that the 2012 Plan corridor was too narrow given the railroad’s restrictive ROW policies, and the steep terrain between the existing tracks and the lakes. The updated alignment moves the trail to the west side of the gravel lakes, on the spoil piles from the former mining pits.

Conflicts

The 2012 Plan preferred alignment had several conflicts which have been mitigated by the new regional trail alignment from the 2021 EAW.

- Railroad crossings – The updated alignment reduces the number of railroad crossings to a single crossing, increasing safety by reducing the potential interaction between users and trains.
- Seneca Wastewater Treatment Plant – The 2012 Plan preferred alignment was adjacent to the wastewater treatment plant. The updated alignment is further away from the plant. The occasionally unpleasant odors from the plant, security issues, and interaction with vehicles at driveways are avoided with the updated alignment.
- Police shooting range – The police shooting range is located immediately on the east side of the railroad tracks at the base of the bluff. Additional study revealed that there was a lack of space to place a trail at this location and the frequent discharge of nearby guns was likely to startle some trail users. The updated alignment is further away from this facility.
- Nichols Fen – The updated alignment avoids potential conflicts with the Nichols Fen that were identified in the 2014 Feasibility Study.
- Seneca Wastewater Treatment Plant outfall pipe – The updated alignment crosses the outfall pipe from the Seneca Wastewater Treatment Plant. The design of the trail was modified to a boardwalk to avoid damage to the outfall pipe.
- Gravel lakes - The trail was relocated to the west side of the gravel lakes to avoid steep terrain and the conflict with the Union Pacific Railroad ROW on the east side of the gravel lakes.
- High voltage power lines - The high voltage power lines and guy wires parallel to the Union Pacific railroad corridor influenced the bridge design and railroad crossing location, which has been adjusted to fit between the powerline and the railroad tracks.
- Minnesota State Trail Jurisdiction – The 2012 Plan identified this segment of trail as potentially being part of the Minnesota River State Trail. While Dakota County is not opposed to the potential of this segment being designated as state trail, staff from the MN DNR have confirmed that the official state trail designation is on the north side of the river.

The updated trail alignment does not impact any new landowners in the corridor. The only landowners impacted by the refined route is the MN DNR (Fort Snelling State Park) and the Metropolitan Council

(Seneca Wastewater Treatment Plant). Staff from MN DNR and Metropolitan Council were engaged in the 2012 Plan, the 2014 Feasibility Study, and the most recent final design and EAW.

Operations

No changes to the operational rules, regulations, or ordinances have been made since the 2012 Plan was adopted. The rules, regulations and ordinance section may be found on pages 59 and 60 of the 2012 Plan. Dakota County is in the process of updating its County-wide Parks Ordinance (Ord. #107) at this time.

Dakota County has several agreements with agencies for the Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail while others, as noted below, are in the process of negotiation and execution.

- Cooperative Agreement Amendment with the MN DNR for 3.2 miles of greenway trail and natural resources restoration within Fort Snelling State Park.
- Easement with the Metropolitan Council for 476 linear feet (approximately 34,960 square feet) of greenway trail on their property.
- Encroachment Agreement with the Metropolitan Council for three greenway trail crossings of sewer pipeline on their easement within Fort Snelling State Park.
- Encroachment Agreement with Xcel Energy for greenway trail and river overlook features within and crossing their easement within Fort Snelling State Park (in process).
- Encroachment Agreement with Magellan Midstream Partners for greenway trail within and crossing their pipeline easement within Fort Snelling State Park (in process).
- Construction and Maintenance Agreement with the Union Pacific Railroad for greenway trail pedestrian bridge overpass crossing of their property near the intersection of Highway 13 and Lone Oak Road in Eagan (in process).

Partner Engagement

Dakota County engaged key partners and stakeholders during the 2012 Plan which informed the initial trail alignment. For the updated alignment, Dakota County reached out to several key agencies including:

- U.S. Army Corp of Engineers
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife
- MN DNR
- Board of Water and Soil Resources
- Gun Club Lake Watershed Management Organization
- Lower MN River Watershed District
- Dakota Soil and Water Conservation District
- City of Eagan

Individual meetings were held with the agencies through the design process. The following issues were identified in the EAW review process:

- A fen management plan is needed.
- The County should use construction techniques to protect and avoid specific wildlife species.
- Updated wetland delineation around new bridge crossing is needed.
- Construction techniques to protect areas of cultural significance.

Dakota County is committed to mitigate the identified issues from the agencies as the project moves towards implementation. There is no opposition to the updated alignment in the Fort Snelling State Park segment.

Public Engagement and Participation

Dakota County completed the majority of its community engagement and outreach during the 2012 Plan, and conducted additional outreach during the 2014 Feasibility Study and 2017 Interpretive Plan. According to the County, the overall feedback confirmed that the planning processes and recommendations were moving in the right direction.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Dakota County conducted virtual public engagement opportunities in late 2019 and early 2020. The County created an interactive project website allowing viewers to comment directly on a map of the area around the updated alignment. In addition, the updated alignment was published in the Environmental Quality Board (EQB) Monitor, and information was shared in regional and local newspapers.

Common themes that emerged from public engagement opportunities included:

- Support for a trailhead connection at Lone Oak Road
- Enhancing safety crossings and access points
- Providing pedestrian and bike access between Cedar Avenue (Nichols Trailhead) to Lone Oak Road
- Connections to surrounding destinations such as the Minnesota River Valley and Fort Snelling State Park
- Providing opportunities for wildlife observation and enjoyment
- Minimizing environmental impacts

Accessibility

The updated alignment is designed to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and State of Minnesota Accessibility standards. The trail corridor from the Cedar Avenue bridge to the Lone Oak trailhead is located on relatively flat terrain. The proposed trail will be accessible and easy to use.

The updated alignment is located near the Red Line Transit station and is accessible via Silver Bell Road. The regional trail will be near mixed-use development and higher density residential located near Highway 13 and Highway 77, and numerous adjacent townhouse developments.

Once on the Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail, trail visitors will have access to the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge and Fort Snelling State Park. The trail will also provide connections to other cities – Burnsville, Bloomington, St. Paul, Minneapolis, South St. Paul, Inver Grove Heights, and Hastings – via the Mississippi River Regional Trail. To the north, the Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail connects to the Nokomis-Minnesota River Regional Trail via the Old Cedar Avenue bridge. The Nokomis-Minnesota River Regional Trail also provides access to the Minneapolis Chain-of-Lakes Regional Park, the Grand Rounds Scenic Byway, and the Nine Mile Creek Regional Trail.

Consistency with Other Council Policies and Systems

Community Development – Forecasts (Todd Graham, 651-602-1322) – The Minnesota River Greenway Master Plan (2012) includes a presentation of the Council's 2030 Regional Development Framework forecast (table 12, page 12 of the 2011 Master Plan). Council staff advise: Met Council's long range forecast is somewhat changed, and is published online at metro council.org/forecasts. The County could refresh its planning by including the contemporary forecast; this is an advisory comment, not a requirement.

Community Development – Local Planning Assistance (Patrick Boylan 651-602-1438) – The proposed amendment is consistent with DC2040, the Dakota County Comprehensive Plan and the local comprehensive plans for the cities of Burnsville, Eagan, Mendota Heights and Mendota.

Regional trails are owned and operated by implementing agencies but as such, the documents are consistent with local land use guide plans.

All of the local communities are designated as Suburban in *Thrive MSP 2040*. And *Thrive* directs Suburban communities to plan for and program local infrastructure needs including those needed to accommodate future growth and implement local comprehensive plans. Local community responsibilities also include developing programs that encourage the implementation of natural resource conservation and restoration.

Environmental Services – Sewers (Roger Janzig, 651-602-1119) – Dakota County submitted the Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail Master Plan Amendment for review. The construction of any new or updating of existing paths, trails, bridges, or any other construction project 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 project, preliminary plans should be sent to Tim Wedin, Interceptor Engineering Assistant Manager (651-602-4571) at the Metropolitan Council Environmental Services.

Environmental Services – Water Resources (Joe Mulcahy, 612-913-8864) – The amendment is accurate and complete, and potential water resource impacts appear to be addressed.

Transportation – Regional Bicycle Transportation Network (Steve Elmer, 651-602-1756) – Given its relevance to regional bicycle planning and potential federal transportation funding for trail construction, it would be advantageous to incorporate language and map elements that describe and reference the Regional Bicycle Transportation Network (RBTN). This could be most easily accomplished by inserting the RBTN route layers into the map shown in Figure 1 of the plan amendment and by adding a short paragraph within the “Development Concept” section.

July 27, 2021

Kurt Chatfield, Planning Manager
Dakota County
Physical Development Division – Office of Planning
14955 Galaxie Avenue
Apple Valley, MN 55124

RE: Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail, Fort Snelling State Park segment Master Plan Amendment

Dear Mr. Chatfield,

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with your team on Tuesday, July 20, 2021 to discuss the Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail Master Plan. Following the Metropolitan Council's July 8, 2021 response to the Environmental Assessment Worksheet for the Minnesota River Greenway, Fort Snelling State Park Segment Project, and the above referenced discussion, Council staff wish to share our expectations and requirements for a focused master plan amendment for this segment of the Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail (see Attachment).

As noted in previous correspondence, Council staff intend for this master plan amendment to be a minor, administrative amendment as the County has already done the vast majority of the work engaging the public and key stakeholders, preparing interpretive plans, and advancing the design of the new alignment.

This focused master plan amendment will bring the Council's document of record for the Minnesota River Greenway, Fort Snelling State Park segment (Master Plan) up to date, which will enable Dakota County to use regional funds for this project on state park land.

If you have questions about these requirements or this letter, please contact Colin Kelly or me.

Sincerely,

Emmett Mullin

Emmett Mullin, Manager
Regional Parks and Natural Resources

CC: Lisa Barajas, Metropolitan Council, Community Development Division Director
Jeff Bransford, Dakota County, Parks Department Administrative Manager
Taud Hoopingarner, Dakota County, Operations Management Director
Colin Kelly, Metropolitan Council, Regional Parks Planning Analyst
John Mertens, Dakota County, Greenway Planner

Attachment: Focused master plan amendment requirements

Implementing Agency: Dakota County

Request: Minnesota River Greenway Regional Trail, Fort Snelling State Park segment – Master Plan Amendment

Policy Guidance: [2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan](#): Chapter 5, Strategy 1: Master plan requirements

Typically master plans for destination or greenway regional trails are required to include 13 components. Council staff request that Dakota County include portions of six master plan components for the purposes of this focused master plan amendment (see below). Master plan components that are not required for this focused master plan amendment do not appear in this attachment.

Chapter 5, Strategy 1: Master plan requirements (RPPP pg. 76-86)

Master plans for regional destination trails or greenways: (RPPP pg. 80-83)

- Development Concept:** A plan for development, including schedule and cost estimates for the project. The plan should include:
 - A map showing the regional trail alignment in relation to the roadway or other land uses, intersection crossings, and other regional and local parks and trails.
 - A section graphic showing the trail separation from the road. Specific to this trail segment, please depict the trail separation from the railroad, where applicable.

Please use this section to discuss the "rationale for selecting the chosen alignment," referenced on page two of the July 8, 2021 EAW response letter.

- Conflicts:** Identification of conflicts with other existing or proposed projects or land uses affecting the park/trail unit, including steps necessary for their resolution.

This is an opportunity to discuss how coordination with Metropolitan Council Environmental Services, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MnDNR), the Union Pacific Railroad, and other key stakeholders has led to a better alignment and may relate to the rationale for selecting the chosen alignment.

Please also use this section to discuss "the decision related to regional (vs. state) trail classification," referenced on page two of the July 8, 2021 EAW response letter.

- Operations:** Rules, regulations or ordinances affecting the trail, including estimated operation and maintenance costs and sources of revenue to operate and maintain the trail.

Please use this section to:

- a. *discuss the "latest use, operations, and maintenance agreements with MnDNR," referenced on page two of the July 8, 2021 EAW response letter, and*
- b. *include any applicable agreements (e.g., joint powers agreements, etc.) in the appendix of the focused master plan amendment.*

- Partner Engagement:** The master plan submitted to the Council shall include a summary of comments received that identifies issues raised and content resulting from engagement efforts related to this specific trail segment.

Please use this section to discuss how affected agencies and other partners were involved in the selection of the alignment and/or development of the Minnesota River Greenway Cultural Resources Interpretive Plan, as referenced on page two of the July 8, 2021 EAW response letter.

Council staff is not asking the County to conduct new public or partner engagement for this focused master plan amendment for the Fort Snelling State Park segment; rather, to reflect the engagement work completed since the 2012 master plan.

Council staff encourage County staff to apply insights gained during the 2014 Minnesota River Greenway Eagan Feasibility Study, the 2017 Cultural Resources Interpretive Plan, and other efforts to engage the public and key stakeholders.

- Public Engagement and Participation:** The master plan submitted to the Council shall include a summary of comments received that identifies issues raised and content resulting from engagement efforts related to this specific trail segment.

Please use this section to discuss "how members of the public and other key stakeholders were involved in the selection of the alignment and/or development of the Interpretive Plan," referenced on page two of the July 8, 2021 EAW response letter.

As stated in the above section, Council staff is not asking the County to conduct new public or partner engagement for this focused master plan amendment for the Fort Snelling State Park segment; rather, to reflect the engagement work completed since the 2012 master plan.

Council staff encourage County staff to apply insights gained in the 2014 Minnesota River Greenway Eagan Feasibility Study and the 2017 Minnesota River Greenway Cultural Resources Interpretive Plan, and other efforts to engage the public and key stakeholders.

- Accessibility:** A plan that addresses accessibility, affordability, and other measures designed to ensure that the facility can be used by people with limited mobility.

This is an opportunity to discuss how the proposed design of the regional trail in this segment will improve Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility, make an important trail connection, provide additional transportation/recreation/trail opportunities closer to residents in the vicinity, and other aspects of accessibility and access.